

Experts Comb MH17 Crash Site as Ukraine Fighting Rages

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Seventy police investigators -- by far the largest number to reach the location so far -- were conducting "search operations in several places at the crash site," a Dutch government statement said.

The mission is tasked with launching an international probe into the downing two weeks ago of the Malaysia Airlines plane with the loss of all 298 people on board.

Over 200 coffins have been sent back to the Netherlands, which lost 193 citizens in the July 17 crash, but many remains have yet to be recovered because of the fighting.

"If they find human remains while searching, they will immediately be recovered," said Pieter-Jaap Aalbersberg, the Dutch police official sent to Ukraine to head up the mission.

Fighting and rebel restrictions to the site next to the town of Grabove had prevented the investigation getting under way before now, and the conflict was still raging on Friday.

The Ukrainian military said an overnight ambush by insurgents in Shakhtarsk, a town 25 kilometres (15 miles) from the main impact site, left 14 people dead, including at least 10 soldiers.

The clash broke a brief lull that had reigned around the site after Ukrainian authorities ordered a ceasefire.

"In total it is known that 14 people died but the bodies of four of them have not been identified and could be Ukrainian soldiers or terrorists," military spokesman Oleksiy Dmytrashkivsky told AFP.

Another spokesman said 13 soldiers were injured and 11 were still missing as clashes continued.

An AFP team some 12 kilometres from the MH17 site heard the sound of tank fire and saw smoke rising from the direction of Shakhtarsk.

Both rebels and Kiev have vowed to secure a circuitous access corridor to the location traced by scouts from the international team Thursday.

Ukraine's army has pledged not to fight in the immediate vicinity of the insurgent-held site.

Elsewhere around the region, government forces relaunched their offensive to oust the separatists, ending a "day of quiet" that had brought a brief pause to over three months of conflict that has cost the lives of more than 1,100 people on the ground.

- Ongoing fighting -

The military claims it is getting close to cutting off main rebel stronghold of Donetsk from the Russian border and the second insurgent bastion of Lugansk, saying it took the village of Novyi Svit, some 25 kilometres southeast of the rebel stronghold of the industrial hub.

Fighting also flared in Donetsk, the main rebel-held city that serves as the base for the international police and journalists trying to reach the MH17 site some 60 kilometres away, with local authorities saying one civilian died after a minibus taxi was hit by mortar shrapnel.

In the second rebel bastion of Lugansk, officials said five civilians were killed and nine injured due to clashes over the past 24 hours.

The continuing violence highlighted the huge task facing the international probe into the downing of the Amsterdam-Kuala Lumpur flight, as more experts from Malaysia also arrived in Ukraine.

Experts are looking to take in heavier equipment and sniffer dogs to help scour the vast site but Dutch police taking the lead have warned that it may be a while before the mission reached full-strength.

The United States says the pro-Russian insurgents likely shot down the plane with a missile supplied from Russia. But Moscow and the rebels contend the aircraft could have been blown out of sky by a Ukrainian jet.

Russia's aviation authorities said Thursday that a team of their own experts had arrived in Kiev and were hoping to reach the crash site.

Meanwhile, rebel officials, Russian and Ukraine envoys, and international monitors also agreed to hold another round of talks next week after discussing a possible prisoner swap in the meeting in Belarus.

- International fallout -

The fresh fighting on the ground entrenched a crisis that has pushed East-West tensions to their highest point since the Cold War. The EU and US have hit Russia with the most punitive measures since the collapse of the Communist bloc over its backing for the rebels.

Russia has shrugged off the latest sanctions against its key finance, defence and energy sectors -- despite warnings they could tip the country's shaky economy into recession -- threatening that the measures would boomerang back to hurt Europe and US interests.

Some EU diplomats expressed concern that the tighter sanctions, which came into effect Friday, may in fact embolden President Vladimir Putin, convincing him that he no longer has anything to lose by further escalating the Ukraine conflict.

NATO has said Russia had boosted the number of troops along the border with Ukraine to "well over 12,000" and that the figure was on the rise.

Russia also ratcheted up tensions by announcing fresh war games involving surface-to-air missiles on its southern flank.
