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Russia challenges accusations that Ukraine rebels shot down airliner

By Maria Tsvetkova

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Russia's Defence Ministry on Monday challenged accusations pro-Russian rebels were to blame for shooting down a Malaysian airliner and asked the United States to produce satellite images to support its assertions.

At a briefing in which generals used flashing radar images on big screens in a state-of-the-art conference room, the ministry said a Ukrainian fighter jet had tracked the airliner despite Kiev's assertions that no aircraft were nearby.

The ministry also denied supplying the separatists in east Ukraine with SA-11 Buk anti-aircraft missile systems, known as "Gadfly" in NATO, or "any other weapons".

The hi-tech presentation appeared a direct response to video and audio recordings used by Ukrainian security officials to back up their accusations of Russian and rebel involvement - recordings the ministry's comments suggested were fabricated.

"Russian air space control systems detected a Ukrainian Air Force plane, presumably an SU-25 (fighter jet), scrambling in the direction of the Malaysian Boeing ... The distance of the SU-25 plane from the Boeing was from 3 to 5 kilometres (2 to 3 miles)," Air Force Lieutenant-General Igor Makushev said.

"Earlier, Ukrainian officials said that on the day of the Boeing 777 crash there were no military aircraft in the region - as you can see this does not appear to be true."

Another officer, Lieutenant-General Andrei Kartopolov, said that, "whether it is a coincidence or not", a U.S. satellite had been monitoring the area at the time.

"We also have some questions for our U.S. partners," he said. "According to the U.S. declarations, they have satellite images that confirm the missile was launched by the rebels. But nobody has seen these images." "If the American side has pictures from this satellite, then they should show the international community."

PROPAGANDA WAR

Russia and Ukraine have been waging a fierce propaganda war over the crisis in eastern Ukraine, where the rebels rose up in April against Kiev's rule.

In an echo of the U.S. State Department's use of lists to debunk what it calls "misinformation" in the Ukraine crisis, Russia issued its own list on Monday of 10 leading questions it wanted Kiev to answer about the downed passenger jet.

President Vladimir Putin has pointed the finger at his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko, saying the disaster would not have happened if Kiev had not ended a ceasefire with the separatists.

Putin, looking drawn, made brief televised comments on the crisis that signaled a new determination to get Russia's version of events across, although they were first released in the middle of the night.

He said the downing of the airliner, killing all 298 people on board, must not be used for political ends, but did not respond directly to the accusations of Russian involvement by supplying arms to the rebels.

Monday's military briefing was the first detailed comment by Russia - which has radar stations and military bases near the border with Ukraine - since the passenger plane came down on Thursday in territory controlled by the rebels.

At the presentation, the officers said the Malaysian airliner was one of three civilian aircraft in the skies over eastern Ukraine at the time.

Kiev later said it stood by its accusations.

"There is evidence that the missile which struck the plane was fired by terrorists, who received arms and specialists from the Russian Federation," said Andriy Lysenko, a spokesman for Ukraine's Security Council.