Russia blocks questioning of spy poison suspects.

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Detectives dispatched to Moscow to investigate the death of former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko heard yesterday they would be barred from personally questioning witnesses and no suspects will be returned to Britain to face charges.

In comments that appeared to sharply limit the activity of the Scotland Yard team, Yuri Chaika, Russia's General Prosecutor, made it clear that if there is to be a "Litvinenko trial," it will be in Russia. British courts have repeatedly refused high profile Russian extraditions, including that of Mr Litvinenko's allies, the oligarch Boris Berezovsky and the Chechen exile Akhmed Zakayev. It seems Moscow is in no mood to help now the boot is on the other foot.

Though Mr Chaika vowed that the Russian side would do its "utmost" to help the British investigation, everything he said appeared to indicate the opposite, a state of affairs that mirrors increasingly icy relations between London and Moscow on the subject.

Efforts by the Yard's anti-terrorist command to talk to one of the central figures in the case - businessman and former KGB bodyguard Andrei Lugovoi - were also facing unexpected delay after it emerged that he was being treated in a hospital for an unexplained ailment. Mr Chaika said: "According to our information, he is ill and currently in hospital. If doctors allow, he will certainly be questioned." News that Mr Lugovoi is in hospital was unexpected: last week he was tested for polonium-210, the lethal radioactive isotope which killed Mr Litvinenko, and allegedly given the all clear.

Mr Lugovoi emerged as a key actor in the month-long drama of Mr Litvinenko's poisoning and subsequent death after he visited London three times in October. Mr Lugovoi met Mr Litvinenko four times on those trips to discuss potential business ventures.

But he again denied any involvement in the poisoning and claimed he is being set up as a suspect. He told Russia's ITAR-Tass news agency: "Once I give all the necessary testimony to the law enforcement organs, I intend publicly to put an end to speculation about my supposed involvement in this story that has caused such a stir."

Mr Chaika indicated that his own officials would conduct the interrogation of any witnesses, with the British allowed only to listen in but not allowed to interject or pose its own questions spontaneously.

A list of individuals who the Yard officers want to question has been submitted to their Russian counterparts. It is understood to include two Russian men who were in London at the time Mr Litvinenko fell ill.

Mr Chaika said Russia's Federal Security Service would not be dragged into the investigation.

A team of nine anti-terrorism officers arrived in Moscow on Monday briefed to find out all it can about Mr Litvinenko's death.

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