

150 civilians dead in Pakistani plane crash

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ISLAMABAD: A Pakistani airliner carrying 150 people crashed in a ball of flames Wednesday in densely wooded hills above Islamabad while coming in to land in heavy rain and poor visibility, officials said.

Pakistani women mourn over the death of their father who died in a plane crash in the Margalla Hills on the outskirts of Islamabad on Wednesday. AFP PHOTO Police said that bodies were scattered around the smoldering wreckage in inaccessible hills and shrouded in thick cloud, following Pakistan's first major aviation accident in four years. Rescue workers have already recovered the remains of all those on board.

The Pakistani prime minister has ordered the military to conduct an investigation into the accident immediately following the tragedy. He has already declared one day of national mourning and called off a cabinet meeting.

Airblue spokesman Raheel Ahmed told Agence France-Presse the Airbus A-321 took off from Karachi bound for Islamabad with 144 passengers and six crew members on board.

"Apparently the cause of the crash is bad weather, but we leave that to the investigators," he told Agence France-Presse.

The plane plummeted into a gorge between two hills, enveloped in clouds and at some distance from the road, severely hampering rescue efforts and limiting visibility for helicopters hovering overhead, an Agence France-Presse correspondent said.

"I saw a big ball of smoke and fire everywhere with big pieces of aircraft rolling down the hill," said police official Haji Taj Gul.

Flames and smoke continued to spew from the wreckage hours later.

Ambulances queued along the nearest road and anxious crowds gathered on the approach to the Margalla Hills while dozens of soldiers, paramilitary troops and rescue workers walked painstakingly uphill to reach the site.

"It's a big tragedy. It's really a big tragedy," Malik told Express TV. State television read out the passenger list. No foreigners were believed to be among the dead.

"What we are finding now are just pieces of bodies, no bodies or injured [people] are visible," rescue official Aitbar Khattak told state television.

"There is no village nearby and there is no ground link to the crash site. It took us one hour and 15 minutes to reach here from the nearest road. It is our fear that there would be many casualties," he said.

Civil aviation spokesman Pervez George said Airblue flight 202 took off from Pakistan's financial capital at 7:45 a.m. and had been preparing to land at Islamabad's Benazir Bhutto International Airport when it crashed.

Anguished families were in tears after hearing of the disaster while waiting at the arrivals terminal where they had intended to meet their relatives.

"We cannot explain our agony, we don't know if he is alive," said Bilal Haider. He said he had come to collect his younger brother Abbas, who went to Karachi for a job interview after getting a Masters in business administration.

"Had we known that this is going to happen, we would never have sent him," Haider told Agence France-Presse.

Police said they were informed first of a loud explosion, then fire sweeping through the hills that dominate the Islamabad skyline, before receiving confirmation that a passenger plane had crashed.

"Dead bodies are scattered," city police chief Bani Amin told Agence France-Presse.

"Five to six helicopters are engaged in the [rescue] operation, but we don't know how long it will take, because the forest is thick and conditions are very difficult."

Airblue is one of Pakistan's most respected airlines. It has only been operating since 2004, using new Airbus A320 and A321 aircraft on domestic routes and flights to Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Manchester.

Pakistan enjoys a relatively good air safety record.

The most recent fatal commercial crash was a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) Fokker F27 that came down in July 2006, killing 45 people on takeoff from the central city of Multan, bound for Lahore.

The deadliest civilian plane crash involving a Pakistani jet was a PIA Airbus A300 that crashed into a cloud-covered hillside as it approached the Nepalese capital Kathmandu, killing 167 people in September 1992.
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