

Poles Blame Russians for Plane Crash

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WARSAW — Russian air traffic controllers failed to warn the crew of Polish President Lech Kaczynski's plane that it was off course shortly before it crashed last year in Smolensk, Polish investigators said Tuesday.

Interior Minister Jerzy Miller — who heads a Polish panel investigating the crash — made the claim nearly a week after the release of a Russian report that laid the blame squarely on the Poles.

The April 10 crash in dense fog in Smolensk killed Kaczynski and 95 others. Issues over blame for the crash have revived tensions between Poland and Russia that the two countries have worked recently to overcome.

All along, there has been agreement that the Polish pilots' decision to land the plane in heavy fog was a key reason for the crash. Yet Polish authorities have reacted with anger to the Russian report for putting all the blame on Poles; they believe that Russian air traffic controllers and the state of the airport — which lacked sophisticated navigation equipment — must have played a role too.

Miller said Russian controllers consistently told the crew that the plane was on the correct course to land — but the aircraft was actually flying 70 meters below the level where it should have been. He said it was also 80 meters off course just seconds before it crashed close to the airport.

"The controller should not be telling the crew that they are on the right course while they were off course," Miller said. "There is no information at all from the control tower to the crew to tell them that they are not on the right path to descend."

Miller presented parts of the recorded conversation between the crew and tower coupled with a video animation of the descent.

In the recording the tower tells the crew that all airport systems are on and ready.

Russia's Interstate Aviation Committee, which released its report on the crash last week, reacted to Poland's accusations by saying Tuesday that it would publish the entire transcripts of the remarks recorded by Russian air traffic controllers.

"With the aim of objectively informing the international community [about the crash], a decision has been made to publish the entire transcript of the recordings of all conversations that were registered by the dispatchers' recorders," said Alexei Morozov, the committee's technical head, Interfax reported.

The Russian findings on the crash put all the blame on Polish pilots who were pressured to make the landing by Polish dignitaries — including a slightly intoxicated Air Force commander who was present in the cockpit.

The Polish commission is to publish its findings in February, and Miller said it would be even tougher on the Poles who were responsible for the flight.

However, Polish officials insist that Moscow address whether any mistakes might have been made by Russian officials.

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