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Substitute Pilot at Controls in Crash

By Alexandra Odynova

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A police officer standing amid the wreckage of a Tu-134 jet near the airport in Petrozavodsk on Tuesday. **Vladimir Larionov**

A plane and flight crew that crashed while trying to land in thick fog at Karelia's capital, killing 44 of the 52 people on board, were provided by a U.S.-affiliated charter airline as a replacement for a smaller jet after too many passengers bought tickets.

The pilot rejected instructions from the air traffic controller to abort the landing just before midnight Monday on the flight from Moscow's Domodedovo Airport, moments before the Tu-134 jet rammed into a highway and soon after exploded into what an eyewitness described as "a pillar of fire."

Local residents managed to pull eight people out of the wreckage before the blaze, including a mother and her two children, aged 9 and 14.

At least nine foreigners, including a Florida-based family of four, were among those who died in the crash.

Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov indicated that pilot error was to blame, drawing a comparison to the crash of a Polish presidential plane in thick fog in the Smolensk region last year.

The Moscow-Petrozavodsk flight was initially supposed to be operated by the RusLine airline on a Bombardier CRJ200, which has 50 seats. But too many people bought tickets, so RusLine called in RusAir to handle the flight with a 66-seat Tu-134 on Friday, RusLine spokeswoman Svetlana Yakovleva said by telephone.

"RusLine doesn't have a Tu-134," Yakovleva said, without specifying how many tickets had been sold.

Several passengers missed the flight, because only 44 passengers checked in — enough to fill the Bombardier jet. Lifenews.ru said at least four people, all employees of the same company, did not show up.

Yakovleva said RusAir provided the Tu-134 jet along with the crew.

RusAir officials could not be reached for comment Tuesday afternoon. The airline's web site said the ill-fated jet was built in 1980, had flown about 40,000 hours with 25,000 landings, and was obtained by the airline earlier this year.

The airline presents itself as a "VIP-class" operator affiliated with Highland, New York-based Clintondale Aviation, which specializes in charter flights in Russia and Kazakhstan. Established in 1994 as CGI Aero, the airline was renamed RusAir in 2002.

Crash investigators were trying to determine Tuesday what happened in the moments before the crash near Petrozavodsk's Besovets Airport, 640 kilometers northwest of Moscow. Preliminary findings suggest that the jet grazed a power line, slammed into trees and finally hit the highway next to the airport.

The plane crashed after it "steered off course and started an early descent" just 700 meters from the runway, said Federal Air Navigation Agency chief Alexander Neradko, according to Itar-Tass.

In addition to pilot error, crash investigators were considering equipment malfunction, poor weather conditions or error by airport personnel. The plane's flight recorders were recovered and sent to Moscow for examination, the Federal Air Navigation Agency said.

Besovets Airport director Alexei Kuzmitsky blamed the crew, saying the air traffic controller had asked the pilot to "make a go around" but the pilot refused, Interfax said.

The air traffic controller, Sergei Shmatkov, said visibility around the airport was "minimal" but not too poor to land. The final decision was in the pilot's hands, and he told Shmatkov "that he would land the aircraft manually at his own risk," Shmatkov told Lifenews.ru.

The pilot did not survive the crash.

Early reports said the runway lights were switched off for about 10 seconds before the crash, but the Federal Air Navigation Agency said the power outage actually came after the jet hit the

power line.

'Pillar of Fire'

Fragments of the plane were scattered as far as 300 meters from the crash site, investigators said.

Photographs released by the Emergency Situations Ministry showed some debris landed a mere 100 meters away from two cottages. A piece of wing and an overturned part of chassis could be seen lying nearby.

Gruesome footage from the site, shot by Russia Today television, showed body parts amid the burning wreckage.

"I've never seen such a horrible scene in my life," said Olga Mimmiyeva, an editor with local weekly Petrozavodsk, who arrived at the crash site about an hour after the crash.

"Severely burned and dismembered bodies were scattered around the scene," she said by telephone, adding that "an insane pillar of fire was glowing over the wreck."

She said "visibility was horrible" because of very thick fog. Even driving her car on familiar roads to the crash site posed a serious challenge, she said.

Petrozavodsk, which was to celebrate its annual City Day holiday on Tuesday, canceled it, and the governor declared three days of mourning for the entire region.

Casualties

Residents of the Besovets village managed to save eight people, including the mother and her 9-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter, Interfax said. Of the nine crewmembers, a flight attendant survived, as did travel agent Alexandra Kargopolova, who was flying to Petrozavodsk to show her two-meter-long pet boa constrictor to her parents, Lifenews.ru said. The snake did not survive.

Of the eight survivors, seven were hospitalized in serious condition on Tuesday night, RIA-Novosti said. Five were airlifted to Moscow hospitals, while two others could not be transported and remained in Petrozavodsk.

Among the 44 people dead were the wife and two daughters of Igor Osipov, head of Coca-Cola's Volgograd office, the local Pervaya Gazeta reported. The businessman, who had driven to Petrozavodsk by car, was waiting for their arrival at the airport at the time of the crash.

Also killed was one of the Premier League's top football referees, Vladimir Pettai, 38, and five senior officials with Rosatom subsidiaries, news reports said.

The dead foreigners included Alexander Simanov, a computer programmer who lived and worked in Florida, and his wife and two daughters, Lifenews.ru said. The four had dual U.S.-Russian citizenship. The other foreigners were Jakob Vetterut of Sweden, Alerds Hans Guenter of the Netherlands, and Vargam Simovyan and Kristina Onishchenko of Ukraine, according to

a Russian-language statement from the Emergency Situations Ministry.

The Swedish citizen, Vetterut, was himself a rescue worker who was traveling to Petrozavodsk to attend a conference, emergency officials said.

The German Foreign Ministry said one more victim had dual Russian-German citizenship. It did not elaborate, but media reports identified him as 54-year-old Oleg Hartvig, head of a Petrozavodsk-based geological company.

Just Like Katyn

Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov, who oversees transportation affairs in the government, compared the crash to the one near Smolensk that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski and 95 others in April 2010.

"Unfortunately, this resembles the crash of the Polish aircraft near Smolensk," Ivanov said in Paris while visiting the Paris Air Show, RIA-Novosti reported.

Kaczynski's Tu-154 jet hit trees and crashed under unclear circumstances. Russian investigators have blamed the crash solely on the Polish pilots, while Poland said Russian air traffic controllers and the airport's outdated navigation equipment also played a role.

The Tu-154 is a larger model of the Tu-134, both of which were workhorses of Soviet aviation and praised by experts as safe aircraft.

Ivanov said pilot error was the most likely explanation for the Tu-134 crash.

But Transportation Minister Igor Levitin appeared to chide Ivanov several hours later, calling on government officials to keep to themselves any "personal conclusions" and wait for the results of the official inquiry, RIA-Novosti reported.

President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin limited themselves Tuesday to expressing their condolences.

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