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VIP Helicopter Crashes at Hoopla for Caucasus Ski Resort

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Correction Appended

STANITSA ZELENCHUK, Karachayevo-Cherkessia — It was supposed to be a banner day.

A throng of government officials, company executives and journalists headed Tuesday to a ceremony celebrating the start of construction of a ski lift at the Arkhyz resort, a crown jewel of a $16 billion Kremlin program to build a cluster of ski resorts in the North Caucasus.

But then misfortune struck.

A Mi-8 helicopter full of VIPs crash-landed just short of its target, destabilized by a sudden gust of wind, said the aircraft's mechanic, Vitaly Kongra, who was among five people hospitalized overnight with head and other injuries. The other eight people on board escaped with scratches and bruises.

"It was a tough landing," the Kremlin's deputy envoy to the North Caucasus Federal District, Maxim Bystrov, told worried-looking officials who surrounded his stretcher a short time later at a ramshackle hospital in Stanitsa Zelenchuk, a town about 100 kilometers from the crash site.

"Hang in there," one official stammered, resting a hand on Bystrov shoulder.

The yellow-and-orange helicopter was flying the VIPs in from the Stavropol region's Mineralnye Vody airport when it came down in a desolate mountain field. Miraculously, it hit the ground minutes before three tour buses full of journalists drove by, also heading for the ski lift ceremony.

The column of buses was accompanied by North Caucasus Resorts officials in a white Mercedes van and a police car, which initially passed the downed helicopter, but then thought better and drove the 300 meters back to the crash site.

The buses also turned around, with the driver in the first announcing that the people in the aircraft might otherwise end up stranded in the mountains.

Dozens of reporters got out of the buses and swarmed the field as the injured were carried from the helicopter.

A Moscow Times reporter was recruited to take baggage out of one bus to make room for the more seriously injured, who were moved in as bags were carried out.

Police officers laid mechanic Kongra, whose head, face, hands and white shirt were covered in blood, in the narrow aisle between the bus seats. The pilot, Sergei Fomintsev, with a bloody shirt and bandaged head, sat in a front seat, flanked by a policeman.

Meanwhile, Bystrov, his assistant Yekaterina Boyenko and the deputy head of the North Caucasus Resorts company, Vladimir Berezhnoi, were quickly loaded into the white Mercedes, which raced out of the field.

Luckily, Bystrov and five others got off with minor scratches and bumps.

The bus with the injured sped about 100 kilometers down a rocky road to a hospital in Stanitsa Zelenchuk, a Cossack village. The other two buses proceeded toward the initial destination, the site of the Arkhyz resort.

Kongra, who later turned out to have a spinal injury and a broken leg, bled from the back of the head during the bumpy ride, and he groaned every time the vehicle jumped or swerved.

At the hospital, doctors and nurses were waiting outside and quickly whisked Kongra and Fomintsov away to an upstairs emergency room.

Oddly, the white Mercedes drove up to the hospital entrance about 10 minutes later. Its passengers staggered out, dazed and bleeding, and were also helped into the emergency room.

The hospital parking lot was soon crowded with the black Audis and Mercedes of local officials.

Arkhyz is among five ski resorts that the Kremlin plans to build in the restive North Caucasus in a bid to revive the local economy by attracting tourists. The project is overseen by state-owned North Caucasus Resorts and got a welcome boost in June when French bank Caisse des Depots et Consignations agreed to provide 840 million euros ($1.2 billion) in investment, mostly in ski lift equipment.

Not much was said on site about the cause of Tuesday's crash, but an unidentified investigative official told Interfax that the tricky-to-navigate rocky landscape might have caused a pilot error. The Investigative Committee opened a check into the incident.

None of the injuries were life-threatening, doctors told news agencies. But Bystrov was ordered to remain in the hospital, this time in Pyatigorsk, for at least 10 days, Interfax said. Three other people also remained hospitalized Tuesday night.

Staff writer Alexandra Odynova contributed to this article from Moscow.

Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article said the deputy envoy for the North Caucasus Federal District, Maxim Bystrov, later attended a ski lift ceremony. In fact, he remained in the hospital, while the ceremony was attended by North Caucasus Resorts head Akhmed Bilalov, who was also in the helicopter. Also, the number of planned ski resorts for the North Caucasus is five, not six.

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