

MiG-31 Grounded After Fatal Crash

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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A MiG-31 flying at the 2001 MAKS air show. MAKS's president says the jet is dependable if maintained properly. **Igor Tabakov**

An aging MiG-31 fighter jet with loaded fuel tanks rammed into the ground at full speed and exploded early Tuesday near the city of Perm, killing both pilots, officials said.

This is the second MiG-31 crash in less than a year, and the Defense Ministry immediately banned MiG-31 flights pending the outcome of an investigation. The military also grounded the jet following the previous incident in November.

The fighter jet vanished off radar screens some 11 kilometers southwest of Perm in the Urals shortly after taking off on a regular training mission, the Defense Ministry [said](#) on its web site.

A pilot in another fighter jet saw the MiG-31 rise to an altitude of more than 300 meters, disappear in the clouds and then plummet back to Earth with a plume of black smoke less than a minute later, Interfax reported, citing an unidentified investigator.

The wreckage was found an hour later strewn across a vast area near the village of Polgary. The bodies of both pilots were also recovered.

The jet carried no weaponry, the Defense Ministry said. The Interfax source said the explosion on impact was possibly still powerful enough to damage the flight recorders, which remained missing Tuesday afternoon.

The investigator denied earlier reports that the MiG-31 had blown up in the air.

Investigators believe that the crash was caused either by a mechanical failure — possibly an engine stall — or bad weather since the area was heavily clouded at the time.

All MiG-31 flights have been suspended until the inquiry is over, an Air Force spokesman said.

The Investigative Committee opened a criminal case on charges of flight safety violations, which carry a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. It was not clear who might be charged over the crash.

The technical condition of the Air Force fleet "leaves much to be desired," said Magomed Tolboyev, a veteran test pilot and honorary president of MAKS, Russia's top air show, Interfax reported. He added that the MiG-31 is a "dependable" jet if maintained properly.

The news site Moscow Post, citing an unidentified source, [reported](#) that all Russian MiG-31s are seriously worn and the last model of the plane was produced in 1994.

The MiG-31 fighter jet that crashed in November was also flying a regular training mission near Perm, but its crew of two ejected safely. The MiG-31 fleet was grounded for a month following the incident, and the results of the investigation have not been made public.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Monday gave the Defense Ministry another week to sign arms contracts after it missed the previous deadline of Sept. 1, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

The ministry has repeatedly accused the domestic defense industry of charging inflated prices for low-quality goods.

More than 1.5 trillion rubles (\$53 billion) has been earmarked for defense in 2011. Chief Military Prosecutor Sergei Fridinsky said this spring that a fifth of all defense spending is stolen every year by corrupt civil officials, dishonest generals and crooked contractors.

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