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Bodies, No Survivors Spotted at Superjet Crash

By Roland Oliphant

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In this picture released by Indonesian Air Force, the wreckage of a missing Sukhoi Superjet-100 are scattered on the mountainside in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, Thursday.

Correction appended

Search and rescue helicopters and volunteers struggling through thick forest and mountainous terrain spotted bodies but no survivors on the Indonesian mountainside where a Sukhoi Superjet 100 crashed by the time darkness forced an end to the search Thursday night.

The loss of the twin-engine passenger jet, which disappeared from radar screens 21 minutes into a demonstration flight on Wednesday, put a freeze on the planned sale of 48 of the craft to Indonesian carriers, the Jakarta Post reported. But industry watchers are predicting a serious impact on all global sales of the new jet, especially if the accident turns out to be a result of technical failure rather than pilot error.

“We haven’t found survivors,” Gagah Prakoso, a spokesman for the search and rescue team, told Indonesia’s Metro TV on Thursday as he announced the discovery of the first bodies, Reuters reported.

Difficult terrain means rescuers will have to wait for the weather to clear before attempting to recover bodies using nets suspended from helicopters, rescuers said. But reports about the search in a mountainous and heavily forested region of the island of Java were confused, with some saying no one has yet reached the scene.

A Russian blogger who was meant to be on the flight said information about the progress of the recovery operation was confusing and contradictory.

“For especially hasty media: Not one person has been to the crash site yet,” Sergei Dolya, who has published photographs of the plane and its wreckage on his Twitter account, tweeted Thursday afternoon.

Writing from what he called the “headquarters” of the rescue operation, he said paratroopers trying to descend to the crash site by helicopter had been unable to jump, but 350 people were trying to climb an 80-degree slope from below.

“Every 10 minutes there is completely contradictory information. No exact info at all,” Dolya tweeted.

The wreckage was found at an altitude of about 1,768 meters on the slopes of the volcanic Mount Salak, about 64 kilometers from Jakarta, on Thursday morning. The plane apparently slammed into a spur of the mountain, not clearing the sheer face of the volcano only by several dozen meters. The aircraft apparently broke into several pieces.

There were 45 people on board, including eight Russian crew members, representatives of the several Indonesian airlines and local journalists who had been invited to join the demonstration flight.

Both Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono have ordered the formation of special groups to ascertain the cause of the crash, but little progress will be made before flight recorders can be recovered.

Air traffic controllers say they lost contact with the aircraft after the pilot and co-pilot asked for permission to drop from 3,000 meters to 1,800 meters — an unusual maneuver so close to the mountain.

The area around Mount Salak has seen seven air crashes in the past decade, the Jakarta Post reported Thursday.

Sukhoi chief test pilot Alexander Yablontsev, with more than 25 years of flying experience, was at the controls. He piloted the jet on its maiden flight in 2008. His co-pilot Alexander Kochetkov, also a test pilot, graduated flight school in 2003. Neither had flown in Indonesia before, the Straights Times reported Thursday.

Magomed Tolboyev, a military test pilot and commander in the Interior Ministry, likened the crash to the crash of a Tu-154 in Katyn in 2010 that killed 96 people, including the Polish

president.

“It’s the same situation as with the Polish crew — poor flight planning. There is very difficult terrain in Java, so you need to plan every step of the flight to the centimeter,” he told Kommersant FM radio.

Sukhoi has insisted that all pre-flight preparations were conducted properly and that the plane was in good working order.

Roman Gusarov, editor-in-chief of the Avia.ru website, told The Moscow Times that reputational damage would be difficult to avoid, whatever the outcome of the investigation.

“Whether or not it turns out to have been a technical fault or pilot error, this is a heavy blow not only to the Superjet but to the whole of Russian aviation,” he said.

The Sukhoi Superjet 100 is the first civilian aircraft to be designed and built in Russia since the Soviet collapse, and it has been billed as the savior of the domestic aviation industry.

With a comparatively inexpensive $30 million price tag, Sukhoi sees it as a challenger to similar aircraft built by Brazil’s Embraer and Canada’s Bombardier, and it has gone to great lengths to bring in Western partners like Boeing and Italy’s Alenia Aermacchi in an effort to make it as modern as possible.

The Fitch Ratings Agency said in a note Thursday that the crash would negatively affect orders in the short term, but would have no impact on the BB/Stable rating of Sukhoi Civil Aviation, the plane’s manufacturer.

While no customer said it had canceled orders Thursday, spokesmen for Indonesia’s Kartika Airlines, which plans to buy 30 jets, and Sky, which plans to buy 12, both told Reuters that the airlines would now wait for the results of the crash investigation before deciding whether to go ahead with their orders. A third local airline, Queen Air, was considering buying six of the aircraft.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian government is considering a full evaluation of the safety audit certification process for all Sukhoi Superjet 100 aircraft that Indonesian companies buy to prevent another crash, the Jakarta Post reported Thursday.

“We can trace the safety audit certification to its factory in Russia, and we will compare their certification to ours,” the Indonesian Transportation Ministry’s air transportation director general, Herry Bhakti Gumay, told reporters in Jakarta on Thursday. He said the process would take about two weeks.

Experts now seem unanimous that the crash will have a serious impact on sales of the Superjet, differing only on whether or how quickly they can recover.

“It’s very early days. The first thing to establish now is the cause of the crash; if it was pilot error, then it could recover quite quickly. If it turns out to have been a technical fault, then there could well be a longer-term impact,” said Tom Chruszcz of Fitch. But he added that the significant support shown by the Russian government is in Superjet’s favor.

“I think the Russian state’s commitment to this project has been quite genuine, and I don’t see them abandoning the project now,” he added.

Gusarov was more pessimistic, comparing the crash to the fate of the Tu-144, a Concorde-like supersonic airliner that was unveiled with great fanfare in the 1960s but was withdrawn after proving unreliable and suffering two fatal air crashes.

Sukhoi would now have to pin their hopes on current Superjet operators Aeroflot and Armenian carrier Armavia to build up a successful operating record with the aircraft, he added.

There are currently only seven aircraft operating commercially — six with Aeroflot, which uses the craft for connections between Moscow and St. Petersburg, Minsk and Nizhny Novgorod, and one with Armavia, which flies the Superjet between Russia’s capital and Yerevan. Both airlines said Thursday that they would continue to fly the aircraft.

President Vladimir Putin sent a message of “heartfelt condolence” to Indonesian President Yudhoyono, adding that he had “issued the necessary instructions to the Russian representatives to take an active part in the ongoing investigation.”

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the Polish prime minister had died in a plane crash in 2010; in fact, it was the Polish president who died.

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