

At Least 20 Killed in Kazakhstan Plane Crash

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Police officers blocking the way to the site of the crash outside the village of Kyzyl Tu, near the Almaty airport. **Shamil Zhumatov**

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A passenger jet carrying at least 20 people crashed Tuesday in heavy fog near Kazakhstan's principal city, Almaty, killing all on board, the airline and officials said.

The Kazakh Prosecutor General's Office listed 21 people as having been killed. The airline said the plane carried 20.

The accident highlights persistent concerns over aviation safety in Kazakhstan, almost all of whose airlines are banned from flying to Western Europe.

Officials said the plane, which was operated by SCAT and was flying from the northern city of Kokshetau, disappeared from radar about 1:13 p.m. local time, more than 20 minutes after it was scheduled to land.

State news agency Kazinform cited an emergency official at the site of the crash as saying

the plane had initially been denied permission to land by the airport due to poor visibility.

The plane then made a second approach but lost its bearings and crashed, the official said. It went down near the village of Kyzyl Tu, about 5 kilometers from Almaty's airport.

"There was no fire, no explosion. The plane just plunged to the ground," Yuri Ilyin, deputy head of the city's emergencies department, said near the scene.

Parts of the plane could be seen in the thick snow. Tractors and other heavy vehicles were being used to cut paths through the snow to the wreckage, but journalists were kept at a distance from the crash site.

The Emergencies Ministry said the plane was a Canadian-built Bombardier CRJ200, a twin-engine regional jet that can accommodate about 50 passengers.

SCAT, whose fleet also includes Boeing 757s and Boeing 737s, said the cause of the crash will not be determined until flight recorder data are examined.

After several hours, rescue teams recovered the flight recorder, the central communications service for Kazakhstan's president said on its Twitter page.

Unusually intense snowfalls and fog have been causing chronic flight delays across the Central Asian nation over the past few weeks.

Visibility at Kyzyl Tu was only about 20 to 30 meters, and much of the area around Almaty was veiled in fog when the plane crashed.

"The preliminary cause of the accident is bad weather," Almaty Deputy Mayor Maulen Mukashev told reporters. "Not a single part of the plane was left intact after it came down."

Kazinform reported that the plane had undergone repairs in Slovenia four months ago.

The Prosecutor General's Office said it is opening a criminal investigation into the airline, which is usual in such cases. Prime Minister Serik Akhmetov ordered the creation of a state commission to investigate the crash.

In a statement on his official website, President Nursultan Nazarbayev expressed his sorrow for those killed.

"On behalf of the people of Kazakhstan and on my own behalf, I express deep condolences to the bereaved families," the statement said.

This is the second major aircraft accident recently in Kazakhstan. In December, 27 people, including the acting head of the country's border guards agency, Turganbek Stambekov, died when an An-72 military plane crashed near the southern city of Shymkent during violent snowstorms.

SCAT, which is based in Shymkent, is banned from flying in the European Union. The company operates regional flights within Kazakhstan, a country of 16.5 million people spread across an area four times the size of Texas.

Many of Kazakhstan's airlines still operate old Soviet-era planes, and some regional airports are poorly maintained. EU officials are also concerned about poor training of staff.

Only one airline in Kazakhstan, state-owned Air Astana, is authorized to fly to the EU.

(AP, Reuters, MT)

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