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Russian Passenger Plane Crashes in Egypt, Killing All On Board

By Shura Collinson

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A couple embraces next to a flight information board at Pulkovo airport in St. Petersburg, Russia, Oct. 31, 2015.

A Russian airplane carrying more than 200 people crashed in Egypt''s Sinai Peninsula on Saturday, killing all of those on board.

Operated by the Russian airline Kogalymavia, the plane was flying from the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh to St. Petersburg, carrying 217 passengers and seven crew members. All the passengers and crew were Russian, the TASS news agency cited the management of St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport as saying.

Egyptian officials said the plane was completely destroyed after it crashed in a mountainous area, Reuters reported. The bodies of at least 100 people were retrieved from the site within hours of the crash, the news agency cited an Egyptian security officer on the scene as saying.

The Russian Embassy in Egypt later confirmed on Twitter that all passengers on board the plane had died.

Several hours after the news of the plane crash broke, tweets and online statements from people claiming to be representatives of the Islamic State terrorist organization, which has been active in the Sinai region, said that its militants had shot down the plane in retaliation for Russian air strikes targeting rebels in Syria.

Egyptian security sources had said earlier there was no sign that the plane had been shot down, Reuters reported, and experts on Islamic State polled by both Russian and international news agencies said militants did not have equipment capable of shooting down a plane flying at a height of 3,000-4,000 meters.

Russian Transport Minister Maxim Sokolov said there was no evidence to support the claims that Islamic State had downed the plane. He said there would be an inspection of Kogalymavia, a small carrier also known as Metrojet, TASS reported.

Flight KGL9268 descended at a rate of about 6,000 feet a minute just before its signal was lost, aviation tracking website Flight Radar 24 wrote on Twitter. It disappeared from the radars about 20 minutes after takeoff, news reports said.

The plane"s pilot had asked for permission to make an emergency landing at Egypt"s El Arish International Airport because of “technical problems,” some media reports said.

“The minister of civil aviation said that it was premature to decide the reasons of the crash and that the whole issue is now under investigation to clarify its reasons,” the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote in an online statement.

Twenty-four of those killed were children, Interfax reported. Some reports said one Belarussian national and two or three Ukrainian nationals were among the dead, while others said that all the passengers were Russian. Russia"s Association of Tour Operators released a full list of passenger names on its website.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences to the families of those killed and ordered Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to set up a state commission to investigate the causes of the crash, the Kremlin said. Medvedev wrote on Twitter that the tragedy would be thoroughly investigated and that the families of the deceased would receive aid.

Russia"s Emergency Situations Ministry said it had sent several aircraft carrying investigators to the scene, including Emergencies Minister Vladimir Puchkov, Transport Minister Sokolov and the head of Russia"s aviation authority, Alexander Neradko, Interfax reported.

A spokesman for Egypt"s prime minister was cited by the Wall Street Journal as saying that one of the black boxes had been recovered from the crash site.

Nov. 1 was declared a day of mourning in Russia for those killed in the crash, and a hotline was set up Saturday for their friends and relatives. Relatives who gathered at Pulkovo Airport where the plane had been due to land were taken to a nearby hotel and provided with psychological counseling, the Emergencies Ministry said in an online statement.

The process of identifying the bodies will take place in St. Petersburg, Interfax cited regional Emergencies Ministry officials as saying.

Egypt has for years been one of the most popular holiday destinations for Russian tourists.

German airline Lufthansa and Air France-KLM said following the Islamic State"s claim to have shot down the plane that they would not fly over the Sinai Peninsula.

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