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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

8 Feared Dead as Russia Tourist Helicopter Crashes Into Lake

By Maria Panina for AFP

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Rescuers said the helicopter sank after the crash. **TASS / Russian Emergencies Situation Ministry**

A helicopter carrying 16 tourists and crew on a sightseeing trip in Russia's far east crashed into a lake on Thursday, leaving eight people including a child feared dead and two others in serious condition.

The Mi-8 helicopter crash-landed into the icy waters of Kuril Lake in the mountainous Kamchatka peninsula in poor visibility and sank, local authorities said.

Staff of the Kronotsky Nature Reserve dispatched boats to the crash site and saved eight people, two of whom are now in intensive care with various injuries. Survivors praised wildlife inspectors for coming to their rescue in a matter of minutes.

"This situation is close to a miracle," said governor Vladimir Solodov.

The other eight — including the only child on board and the crew commander — were

missing and feared dead.

"We don't have any information about the rest," the governor's spokeswoman, Alla Golovan, told AFP.

The wreckage of the helicopter was now lying at a depth of more than 130 meters (420 feet) some 700 meters from the shore, the emergencies ministry said.

Rescuers and divers were dispatched to the scene but they did not have the necessary equipment to begin work at that depth.

Solodov said the authorities turned to the Defense Ministry, which sent the necessary underwater equipment.

"Robots will be studying the bottom of Kuril Lake at the site of the crash," the governor said.

Rescued from icy water

Recounting the crash and subsequent rescue operation, wildlife inspectors said that the visibility at the lake was no greater than 100 meters, adding that they heard the helicopter but could not see it.

When staff of the reserve heard a loud "boom," they said they dispatched two motorboats with four inspectors, who reached the scene in about three to four minutes.

"Eight people were on the surface, who we immediately lifted onboard," inspector Yevgeny Denges said in a statement. The inspectors looked for other survivors but could not find anyone, Denges added.

Embed:

> СК опубликовал видео с места крушения Ми-8 на Камчатке. Вертолет с туристами упал в озеро и ушел на глубину более 130 метров. Восемь человек числятся пропавшими без вести. Предположительно, они погибли. На видео – акватория озера, найденные вещи экипажа и пассажиров. pic.twitter.com/HGDd8vT4nw
>
> — Znak.com (@znak_com) August 12, 2021

Citing the survivors, the nature reserve said that the chopper began to sink nose first and the passengers managed to swim up to the surface from a depth of eight to nine meters.

"The water temperature in the lake is no more than 5-6 degrees (Celsius, 41-43 degrees Fahrenheit), it is impossible to remain in it for a long time," the reserve said.

The tourists were from Russia's second city St. Petersburg.

One of the survivors, Viktor Strelkin, said that at the time of the accident he was sleeping and woke up when a stream of water hit him in the face.

"My friend's son was sitting next to me. He was fastened with a security belt and I did not have time to yank him out because I woke up too late," Strelkin said in remarks released by authorities.

'Horrible weather conditions'

Strelkin, who practices free-diving, managed to unfasten himself, breathe in some air before the cabin filled with water, get out of the aircraft and swim up to the surface.

Another survivor, state TV presenter Nikolai Korzhenevsky, appeared to blame the crew for the accident.

"For some reason we flew there even though we knew about the horrible weather conditions there," he said.

Kamchatka is a vast peninsula popular with adventure tourists for its abundant wildlife, live volcanoes and black sand beaches.

The aircraft belongs to a firm called Vityaz-Aero, co-owned by local lawmaker Igor Redkin.

Earlier this week, Redkin made headlines in Russia when he admitted to killing a man he mistook for a bear.

Officials said the helicopter had been in operation since 1984 but was in good condition.

The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it was looking into a potential violation of air safety rules.

The regional prosecutor's office launched a probe to study "the implementation of the legislation on the provision of tourist services."

In July, a small plane crashed on the peninsula, killing 19 people when it flew into a cliff.

Airplane crashes are fairly common in Russia due to poor maintenance and lax compliance with safety rules.

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