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Sixteen Killed in Russian Parachutists' Plane Crash

By Anastasia Clark for AFP

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Russia Emergencies Ministry/TASS

Sixteen people were killed when a plane carrying parachutists crashed in central Russia on Sunday, the emergencies ministry said.

The L-410 plane carrying 22 people crashed around 9:23 a.m. local time near the town of Menzelinsk in the republic of Tatarstan, the ministry said on its Telegram channel.

"Six people were rescued, 16 were taken out without signs of life," the ministry said.

The ministry had earlier said 15 people died and that the aircraft was carrying 23 people.

While the Menzelinsk club organizes skydiving experiences for amateurs it has also hosted championships and training sessions for cosmonauts.

Images published by the ministry showed the aircraft broken in half with a severely dented nose.

The six survivors were taken to hospital, the local health ministry told the Interfax news agency.

Tatarstan head Rustam Minnikhanov, who traveled to the scene, said pilots had reported an engine failure and requested an emergency landing shortly after taking off.

He said the plane tried to avoid a nearby residential area as it approached for landing but "the altitude didn't allow it."

The plane hit a parked van with its wing and the aircraft turned over.

All the survivors were sitting in the back of the plane, club instructor Oleg Shiporov told TASS news agency.

Russian investigators have launched a criminal probe over the violation of safety rules.

Monday has been declared a day of mourning in Tatarstan.

- 'Cosmonauts train here' -

According to Interfax, the plane belonged to the Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation and Navy of Russia, which describes itself as a sports and defense organization.

The organization was created in the 1920s and Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man to travel to space in 1961, has trained on its airfields.

The head of the Menzelinsk parachuting club said that it was not to blame for the accident.

"We are the best, we are among the top five clubs," Ravil Nurmekhametov told TASS news agency, adding that the club had hosted European and World championships.

"Cosmonauts train here," he said.

TASS cited a source as saying that the state Cosmonauts Training Centre has suspended its work with the club pending the investigation.

In 2018, two amateur skydivers died while completing a group free-fall jump at the Menzelinsk club after their parachutes got tangled.

The Czech-built L-410 light aircraft was one of the two planes used by the club, according to its website.

Two L-410 planes suffered fatal accidents in Russia earlier this year, leaving a total of eight people dead.

Russia was notorious for plane accidents but has improved air traffic safety in recent years

with major airlines switching from Soviet aircraft to modern jets.

But poor maintenance and lax safety standards still lead to frequent accidents in far-flung regions involving light aircraft, with occasional large-scale tragedies.

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