

Russian Airline Denies Plane Crash Responsibility

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A military investigator from Russia stands near the debris of a Russian airliner at its crash site at the Hassana area in Arish city, north Egypt, Nov. 1, 2015.

The Russian airline whose passenger plane crashed in Egypt on Saturday, killing all 224 people on board, sought Monday to refute any suggestion that it bore responsibility for the disaster.

An official from the Kogalymavia airline said at a press conference Monday that the plane had crashed due to external impact.

"The only reasonable cause of the crash would be mechanical impact on the aircraft," Alexander Smirnov, the company's deputy head and flight director, told reporters.

"There is no combination of system failures that would result in the plane breaking apart in the air," he said.

Asked what kind of impact could have caused the damage, Smirnov declined to elaborate, saying an official investigation to determine the crash cause was ongoing.

Earlier, Russian officials had dismissed purported claims by the Islamic State terrorist organization that it had downed the plane in revenge for Russian air strikes against rebels in Syria.

After the press conference, the head of aviation industry watchdog Rosaviatsia told the Russia 24 television channel the company's conclusion was premature, and that there was not enough information at present to name the cause of the catastrophe, news agency TASS reported.

Andrei Averyanov, deputy head and technical director of Kogalymavia, said that the pilots had not attempted to report an emergency situation, likely because they were immediately incapacitated.

"The plane was in very good condition," he said at the press conference broadcast by the RT news agency.

The comments by Kogalymavia executives came after a squall of criticism was thrown at the company — which has suffered three accidents, two of them fatal, since 2010.

In the aftermath of the crash, the worst in Russian history, reports swirled that the aircraft had been faulty and its operator was suffering financial difficulties.

The crashed plane was an 18-year-old Airbus A321, which was damaged when its tail hit the runway during a botched landing in Cairo in 2001, according to the Aviation Safety Network, an air accident database. Bought by Kogalymavia in 2012, the jet had racked up 56,000 airborne hours during 21,000 flights since entering service in 1997.

Kogalymavia executives rebuffed suggestions that faulty repair work or wear and tear had caused the plane to fall. The repaired tail area was inspected last year, Oxana Golovina, an executive at Kogalymavia's parent company, TH&C, said Monday.

"The airplane was 100 percent ready to fly, in working order, otherwise it wouldn't have taken off," she said.

With Russian and Egyptian authorities still scouring wreckage at the crash scene in Sinai and examining the aircraft's black boxes for clues on the cause of the accident, the disaster has re-focused attention on the dismal safety record of Russian airlines in recent decades. According to The Independent newspaper, 20 fatal air crashes involving Russian airlines in the past two decades have claimed 1,330 lives.

Kogalymavia began flying Russian-built Tupolev passenger planes between its base in western Siberia and other Russian cities in 1993. In 2011, the company switched to Western planes and began operating flights for Russian tour agencies to destinations in Europe and the Middle East, rebranding as Metrojet in 2012. According to the company's website, it now has a fleet of 9 Airbus planes.

Russian blogger Olga Fink described flying with Kogalymavia to Egypt in 2013. "The seats

were from at least four different aircraft, and everything shook,” The Times newspaper quoted her as writing. “The stewardesses were openly drunk ... and we only landed at the fourth attempt.”

In 2011, a Kogalymavia plane burst into flames taxiing to the runway in Surgut in western Siberia, killing at least three people, according to the Aviation Safety Network. A year earlier, one of the company's planes suffered a failed landing at Mashhad Airport in Iran. Forty-six passengers were injured.

Smirnov said Monday that in Saturday's crash the airliner had decelerated by more than 300 kilometers per hour and lost about one and a half kilometers in altitude in one minute before it hit the ground.

“This isn't flying, it's falling,” he said.

Responding to the disaster, duma deputy Yevgeny Fedorov said Monday that small airlines were unable to guarantee the safety of their aircraft, and recommended that Russia should have fewer, larger airlines, according the RIA Novosti news agency.

Kogalymavia is Russia's 19th-largest airline (of 35), and flew 779,626 passengers over January-September this year, according to Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency.

Another deputy, Vadim Solovyov, on Monday sent a request to the Prosecutor General and Prime Minister to conduct a technical check of every passenger plane in Russia, while deputy Vladimir Gutenev proposed on Saturday to cap the age of passenger planes at 15 years.

In 2013, 50 people died when a 23-year-old Tatarstan Airlines jet crashed onto an airport runway in the Russian city of Kazan.

Smaller airlines are also coming under pressure this year from a slump in demand, as a recession and weak ruble makes it more expensive for Russians to travel overseas. According to Federal Air Transport Agency data, Kogalymavia saw passenger numbers fall more than 30 percent in the first nine months of this year, compared to the same period in 2014.

Russia's labor inspectorate, Rostrud, on Monday announced that Kogalymavia had missed salary payments to employees for two months, according to RIA Novosti.

However, Golovina denied that the company had any financial problems which could undermine flight safety.

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