

Korean Air jumbo jet crashes near London

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As British accident specialists began investigating the cause of Wednesday's crash of a Korean Air (KAL) cargo plane near Stansted Airport, London, speculation focussed on the plane's cargo.

All four crewmen were killed in the crash that occurred on Wednesday evening at 18:40, shortly after the plane took off from Stansted, en route for Seoul via Milan, Italy. The dead men were named as pilot Park Duk-kyu, 57, co-pilot Yoon Ki-sik, 33, engineer Park Hun-kyu, 38, and maintenance mechanic Kim Il-suk, 45.

Eyewitnesses reported that the Boeing 747 appeared to explode in a "huge fireball". It then hurtled over homes near Great Hallingbury, three miles southeast of the airport, and the M11 motorway. Stansted is London's third and newest airport, operating passenger flights to Europe and international freight. A far greater disaster was avoided only because the plane crashed in Hatfield Forest, rather than a residential area, scattering debris over a wide area. The pilots did not have time to issue a mayday call.

Motorists on the busy M11 described seeing a "large flash followed by a large bang", followed by what looked like a giant mushroom cloud. Residents in the villages of Great Hallingbury and Little Hallingbury said that they could feel their houses shake as the plane landed. The jet brought down power lines, throwing local homes into darkness.

Reporting from the scene, James Blatch of the British Broadcasting Company said the debris was strewn for hundreds of yards. "There are bits of metal and twisted fragments in the trees. This Boeing 747 appears to have been completely and utterly destroyed."

The crash forced the closure of Stansted Airport and the cancellation of 80 flights. Thousands of passengers had to be diverted to other airports. Many travellers were stranded overnight at the airport, which finally reopened on Thursday morning. Disruptions were

expected to continue throughout the holiday period.

Early reports focussed attention on the poor safety record of KAL, South Korea's national airline, whose rapid expansion has matched that of the South East Asian economies. The company carries cargo to 32 cities in 21 countries, but it has one of the worst aviation safety records in the world. An estimated 700 people have died in crashes involving its planes over the past 20 years.

In 1997, more than 200 people were killed when a KAL jet crashed on the Pacific island of Guam. After another crash in April this year, the US Department of Defence advised its staff not to use KAL. The company's partners Air Canada, Air France and Delta Airlines suspended their marketing link-ups with the airline.

KAL head Cho Yang-Ho was forced to step down after South Korean President Kim Dae-jung instructed the company to change its management structure. In November Cho, whose family retains a controlling stake in KAL, was indicted for tax evasion and embezzlement.

KAL's new head, Yi Taek-shim, promised to make the airline one of the safest in the world, and a reported £120 million was spent retraining pilots. Following Wednesday's crash, the South Korean Ministry of Construction and Transportation announced it had imposed a six-month ban on the airline opening new international routes. This is in addition to a one-year penalty already in place, limiting KAL's domestic routes. This restriction is due to expire next November.

The Ministry said that if the airline were found to be responsible for the latest crash, additional action could include route closures, the suspension of some routes and fines. The South Korean government and KAL are sending teams to Britain to help in the investigation. One of the plane's black-box flight recorders was located by Thursday morning, but another was still

missing.

Press reports also drew attention to Boeing's safety standards. The KAL crash came less than two months after the EgyptAir Flight 990 disaster, which killed all 217 people on board. The EgyptAir jet was a Boeing 767 and was the third Boeing plane operating from John F. Kennedy Airport to be involved in such a tragedy in as many years.

The 747-200 used by KAL is one of Boeing's older aircraft, and was designed to carry a combination of freight and passengers as needed. 747s have been involved in three recent accidents—one in Bangkok and two in India. An Air France-operated 747-200 cargo plane of the same type as the KAL jet crashed and exploded in southern India in March 1999. Boeing and American aviation authorities are also to take part in the KAL investigation.

By Thursday morning, attention turned to the KAL jet's cargo. The airline originally claimed that the load was "general", but refused to reveal its cargo list. Immediately following the crash, residents were told to stay indoors and keep their windows closed. A radio ham operator reported hearing mention of low-grade explosives on board the jet as he was listening in to emergency frequencies. An eyewitness, Richard Smith, said he had been "stopped in his tracks" a quarter of a mile from the crash scene, where he had been going to help, by a "toxic stench".

Later, KAL spokesman Han Sang-Bum reported that the cargo had included chemicals, adding, "we cannot rule out the possibility of the special cargo triggering the crash." According to the airline, just 199 kilograms of the cargo was labelled "dangerous goods". This is said to consist of paint, "benzyl type" products and other chemicals. Benzene is highly flammable and poisonous.



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