

Nigerian plane crashes in city suburb

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A Nigerian passenger plane crashed into a densely populated suburb of the city of Kano in northern Nigeria at about 1.35pm on May 4, killing at least 148 people. The Nigerian Red Cross said that a minimum of 148 bodies had been recovered, with 49 people seriously injured. The final death toll is expected to be much higher, according to rescue workers. Hundreds of local people have been made homeless.

The plane was owned and run by Executive Airline Services (EAS), a small private Nigeria-based company. It had taken off just three minutes earlier from the Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport and was heading for the commercial capital, Lagos. It plunged to the ground, ploughing into inhabited shacks and other buildings, before exploding in flames and starting a number of fires. At least 10 residential buildings, including a mosque and a school, were destroyed before the plane came to rest and exploded into flames.

About 76 of the dead were the passengers and crew on the plane. An EAS spokesman said that the Nigerian Sports Minister, Ishaya Mark Aku was among the crash victims. Three passengers and one member of the crew had managed to escape.

Those killed on the ground were mainly inhabitants of the impoverished residential district of Gwammaja, near Kano. Distraught residents of the area have been searching for survivors in the aircraft wreckage and in the remnants of their homes.

The closure of the main runway for repairs may have played a part in the crash. The alternative runway was shorter and it may not have been long enough in the hot conditions at the time of the flight. The attempt to take off in unfavourable circumstances may have put too much pressure on the aeroplane. It is believed that the plane suffered an engine failure, and this prevented the pilot regaining control. Witnesses said the plane was swaying from side to side after it had taken off, and it

then went into a nosedive.

The last major air disaster in Nigeria was in 1996, when 142 people died in a Boeing 727 that plunged into a lagoon outside Lagos. While no details are available, it is likely that a major factor in the crash was the condition of the aircraft, the age and lack of maintenance of which is a scandal throughout Africa.

In the mid-1980s, the Nigerian military government of the time deregulated the airline industry, a policy imposed—as with most African countries—under an IMF Structural Adjustment Programme. Around 12 private companies, including EAS, were set up in competition with the state carrier, Nigeria Airways. Most of Nigeria's 50 or more air disasters in the last two decades have involved these private companies.

There are great concerns about the use of old and discarded aircraft by private companies. Over 75 percent of the aircraft operating locally are second hand, most of them bought as rejects from European countries. In April, the Federal government announced that the airline operators would be banned from using aircraft more than 22 years old, a move that led to protests from their owners.

From statistics collated four years ago, it has been predicted that the rate of aviation accidents in Africa will be one major disaster per week by the year 2010. In terms of fatal events (defined as an event in which at least one passenger was fatally injured solely due to the operation of an aircraft) per million flights, the accident rate for most sub-Saharan African airlines is at least six times greater than a similar calculation for the United States.



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