Spain: military chiefs replaced over Yak-42 plane crash

Keith Lee
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The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government has replaced three of its top generals after it was discovered that 22 bodies from the May 2003 Yak-42 military plane crash were given to the wrong families.

General Francisco Jose Garcia de la Vega has taken over as air force chief of staff from General Eduardo Gonzalez Gallarza; General Jose Antonio Garcia Gonzalez is now army chief of staff, replacing General Luis Alejandre.

Relatives of the soldiers killed in the crash were told by Turkish scientists that DNA tests showed that the remains given to them were misidentified.

Turkish authorities released the results of the test carried out on 39 bodies, in which it was found that only 17 had been correctly identified. The Yak-42 plane, owned by Ukrainian Mediterranean Airlines (UMA), crashed in Turkey on May 26, 2003, killing 62 Spanish soldiers and 12 Ukrainian flight crew.

The aircraft had left Kabul where the soldiers, mainly from a regiment of engineers, had completed a four-month tour of duty working with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed in construction and bomb disposal duties in Afghanistan. It had stopped off at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to pick up more Spanish troops on their way to Zaragoza military base in Spain. Flying over Turkey, the pilot had requested to land in the Black Sea port of Trabzon for refuelling, but two landing attempts were abandoned due to dense fog and high winds. During the third attempt the aircraft veered out of control, crashing near the town of Macka.

Current defence minister Jose Bono has denied that the generals' replacements had anything to do with pressure from the relatives of the dead soldiers to explain how their loved ones died. At a news conference Bono said it was a coincidence that the appointments came on the same day as the announcement over the bodies mix-up.

But some sections of the Spanish press have accused the PSOE government of removing the generals in order to protect them from the ensuing scandal.

The dismissed generals have reacted strongly to the sackings. General Luis Alejandre accused the government of "disloyalty" and of "manipulation of information."

Speaking at a military ceremony he said, "I cannot deny that in recent days I have felt vague tremors of disloyalties, of vengeance, of jealousies, of interested lies, and manipulation of information."

Although the military plane crash took place while the right-wing Popular Party (PP) was in power, since coming into government the PSOE has shown the same indifference to the relatives of the crash victims as did the PP. It has sought to blame the misidentifications on the PP, but has so far refused to grant a public inquiry into the plane crash.

The PP's then defence minister, Federico Trillo, insisted that the plane was safe, to which relatives of the dead soldiers reacted with undisguised fury. They began to recount in the press what their sons, husbands and fathers had told them of the condition of the aircraft. A picture quickly emerged of troops raising a series of concerns through official channels regarding the aircraft being unfit to fly.

The families of the 62 dead soldiers have now called for Trillo to resign from parliament over his role.

Trillo had promised the families that all the bodies would be correctly identified. And the latest blunder has infuriated the families even more. In four cases the coffins that returned to Spain held the remains of more than one person. In other cases body parts from some soldiers ended up in more than one casket. It is next to

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impossible for any of the families to have the correct remains, as 14 of the bodies have since been cremated.

Carlos Ripolles, the president of the relatives association who lost his brother in the crash, said that officials “did not assure the safety of their men or the honour of their dead.” He later said he expected the official number of errors to rise, following more DNA testing. He accused Trillo of “lying to Spain” and “lying to parliament.”

The relatives association has again called on the state prosecutors to open an investigation into the crash.

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