

Scotland: Fatal helicopter crash raises concerns over offshore safety

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The following article was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by a worker in the oil industry.

On April 1 an AS332L2 Super Puma helicopter carrying personnel from BP's Miller platform crashed into the North Sea with the loss of two crew and 14 passengers. The helicopter was operated by Bond Offshore Helicopters.

It is the worst loss of life in the North Sea since the Piper Alpha explosion, which killed 226 people in 1988.

The Super Puma was on a scheduled passenger flight. At 13.54 GMT the co-pilot made a routine call, followed twelve seconds later by a Mayday call. Air traffic controllers tried unsuccessfully to contact the aircraft, before asking the crew of another helicopter in the area to search an area based on the Super Puma's last radar position.

The cause of the accident appears to have been a catastrophic failure in the main gearbox, leading to the main rotor blades detaching and severing the tail boom. Pilots and crew would have had just seconds warning as the aircraft disintegrated and plummeted into the sea.

The Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) called for safety checks on all Super Pumas operating in the North Sea. BP has suspended its contract with Bond and is using other Aberdeen-based aviation companies to provide helicopter transport for its operations.

There have been several other incidents involving Super Pumas in the North Sea this year.

On February 18 an EC225 Super Puma, operated by Bond Offshore Helicopters, performing a landing approach to BP's ETAP platform ditched in the sea. All crew and passengers survived.

On April 6 an EC225 was forced to make a "precautionary landing" on the Safe Caledonia after a fuel problem was reported.

And on April 9, while landing on Total's North Alwyn platform, pieces of metal were seen coming out of the exhaust of an EC225. The last two incidents involved helicopters operated by CHC Scotia.

An initial bulletin from the AAIB stated that the helicopter

approached the platform in poor visibility, and that the crew had mistaken the altitude. However, the Terrain Avoidance Warning System (TAWS) that automatically sounds when the helicopter descends below 100 feet was not recorded on the flight data recorder indicating that it was malfunctioning.

Last Thursday a second report by the AAIB said it was necessary to conduct checks on Puma gearboxes for signs of possible gearbox failure. The helicopters would be grounded if this was not done, it warned.

Members of the Brazilian Oil Workers Federation (FUP) refused to board Super Puma flights for six months following a crash in February 2008 that killed five workers.

Speaking about the recent fatal crash in the North Sea, Jose Marie Rangel of the Sindipetro union stated, "The best practice would be to ground this type of craft until after a full investigation of the accident."

He continued, "Of all the aircraft that Petrobras uses, the Super Puma L2 is the one that has the most problems. Its cost/benefit ratio is terrible as it spends so much time on the ground with mechanical problems. After the accident last year union members boycotted it."

On March 12 this year, a S92 helicopter operating offshore in Canada crashed, killing 17 of the 18 people onboard. Demands for the replacement of gearbox mounting studs on the particular model involved led to the grounding of four helicopters used by the UK Coastguard until the modifications could be implemented. These helicopters are operated on behalf of the Coastguard by CHC.

"Workhorse" of the oil industry

There are three main helicopter operators based in Aberdeen that supply transport services to the North Sea oil industry—Bristows, CHC Scotia and Bond Offshore Helicopters. They all operate Super Puma aircraft. The aircraft is the workhorse of the North Sea oil industry and is

operated by many military and civilian organisations around the world. It is favoured amongst many organisations due to its safety record.

Although all the incidents this year appear to have separate causes, they point to an underlying issue with the use of helicopters in the North Sea oil industry.

The nature of the set-up in Aberdeen may lend some explanation towards this. Three separate companies operate some 50 helicopters flying approximately 60 flights a day out of one airport. Of these 50 helicopters, around 90 percent are variants of the Super Puma.

If the Super Puma was to be suspended from service in the North Sea (and the rest of the UK continental shelf—there are oil/gas rigs all around the UK with several locations for offshore helicopter operations), then the remaining helicopters would not be able to cope with personnel turnover.

Ship transfer is not an option. Transfer of personnel from ship to oil rig involves using a crane to lift personnel in a basket.

A Health & Safety Executive document providing guidance on personnel transfers using this method states, “Personnel transfer operations using lifting equipment and personnel carriers should only be undertaken when the particular circumstances make it essential, and it is not reasonably practicable to transfer personnel by less hazardous means.”

Lifting and hoisting operations in general are the most risky performed offshore. In addition, high sea states in the North Sea would limit transfer windows.

The conclusion is that the UK Oil & Gas industry could not operate if Super Pumas were removed from service either temporarily or permanently.

Competitive cost-cutting

Bond moved out of the North Sea area of operations in the 1990s, raising concerns amongst oil operators that a lack of competition would lead to a rise in helicopter services costs. It returned to operating in the North Sea in the early 2000s.

To have three operators all vying for the same contracts can only lead to costs being kept as low as possible. This must inevitably include cuts in maintenance and training. The North Sea oil industry is notorious for paying below average wages for helicopter pilots (20 to 30 percent less than other civilian pilots) and there is a high staff turnover.

Bristows has recently announced that it will be making redundancies amongst its pilots. This is at a time when they

will be carrying extra workload, supplying flights to BP rigs.

Jim McAuslan of the British Airline Pilot’s Association (BAPLA) stated that the announcement “raises broader concerns about the supply chain in the North Sea. It would appear to BALPA that the oil and gas companies continue to make huge profits and yet are remorselessly squeezing businesses all the way down the supply chain. “There is a real danger that this approach could squeeze many businesses out of existence or force businesses into cutting corners. This boom and bust approach should be a concern to everyone who cares about a sustainable and safe industry in the North Sea.”

This trend is apparent throughout the oil and gas industry. Many oil companies based their 2009 budgets on making \$100-plus per barrel. Now that oil prices have plummeted, budgets are being slashed across the industry. Supply and service companies are being approached to make budget cuts and many contract staff have been let go.

During the 1990s when oil prices were exceptionally low, many experienced workers were let go. Many of these workers never returned to the oil industry when work increased, and there has been a significant skills shortage for the past several years.

HSE figures released in February revealed that it had been called to investigate over 1,000 incidents between 2006 and 2008. The North Sea oil industry is based on oilrigs that are normally 15 to 30 years old and have been poorly maintained over this period.

That this should be the case when oil prices were reaching record highs points to maintenance and safety issues becoming even more serious now that oil prices are declining. It is an indictment of the profit system that equipment and machinery so essential for the world economy has been allowed to deteriorate so badly. With current trends in safety and expenditure on integrity, it is highly likely that more tragedies will follow from this recent accident.



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