

Air Algérie plane crashes in northern Mali

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While en route from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso to Algiers, Algeria a twin-engine passenger plane operated by Air Algérie crashed in northern Mali early Thursday morning with 116 people onboard. It is still unclear, at the time of this writing, what caused the Boeing MD-83 to fall from the sky.

French military forces located the wreckage of Air Algérie Flight AH 5017 late last night near Tilemsi, a remote desert community in the Sahara Desert close to Mali's border with Mauritania. Two French Mirage 2000 fighter jets stationed in Mali were scrambled to assist in the search for the wreckage.

While Air Algérie has a relatively good in-flight safety record another MD-83 operated by Dana Air experienced engine failure in 2012 which caused it to crash into a building in Lagos, Nigeria, killing all 153 people onboard and 10 people on the ground.

Approximately an hour into the flight, the plane's pilots asked for permission to divert from the original path to avoid a heavy rain storm in the area. A powerful sandstorm also affected much of northern Mali at the time of the flight.

There were multiple conflicting reports of the flights last known location and who had made last contact with the flight before it disappeared from radar. Burkina Faso Transport Minister Jean Bertin Ouedrago claimed that air traffic controllers in Niamey, Niger last made radar contact with the Air Algérie Flight AH 5017 around 338 GMT Thursday morning. However, according to report by Reuters, an anonymous source in the Niamey control tower denies ever being in contact with the flight.

Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal stated that ten minutes prior to disappearing from radar, the pilots made contact with air traffic controllers in Gao, Mali. An anonymous source was quoted by AFP as saying that the plane was "not far from the Algerian frontier" when it was instructed to make a detour to

avoid a possible collision with other flights due to poor visibility.

The 116 people on board included 51 French citizens, 27 Burkina Faso citizens, eight Lebanese citizens, six Algerians, five Canadians, two from Luxembourg and one person each from Switzerland, Egypt, Ukraine, Belgium, Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, and the United States. The two pilots and four crew members were all from Spain.

Bad weather, anti-aircraft fire, or a terrorist attack are all possible causes of the crash. Ongoing fighting in northern Mali between French-led military forces and Islamic militants presents a serious risk to air travel in the region.

Since the 2011 NATO war in Libya, which led to the collapse of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, the African Maghreb and Sahel have been flooded with fighters and heavy weaponry. This situation has been further inflamed by continuing imperialist intervention. Troops from France, Mali, and Chad and other African countries have been fighting against Al-Qaeda affiliated militants in the north of Mali since January of last year.

At the height of Operation Serval, 4,000 French troops led fighting against Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Dine, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in Western Africa (MOJWA). France had 1,000 troops stationed in Mali as of January of this year and an air force contingent based out of N'Djamena, Chad.

The reestablishment of French military presence in the region coincided with the US Air Force deploying Predator drones at an air base in Niamey, Niger at the start of last year. Ouagadougou Airport in Burkina Faso is also utilized as a base for CIA surveillance operations. The Obama administration has been expanding the presence of US military personnel in Western Africa under the pretense of fighting the growth of militant Islamic organizations including

AQIM and Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The French government is planning to establish a permanent military base in Mali, a former colony which it ruled from 1880 to 1960.

Due to threats from AQIM, Ansar al-Dine, and MOJWA to Western interests the Federal Aviation Association (FAA) recently issued a warning to US airlines and pilots for extra vigilance when flying over Mali. The FAA warned of the risk to airplanes flying at lower altitudes from small arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades, rocket and mortar fire, and shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles.

Despite the highly volatile situation in the region, a senior French official expressed doubts yesterday that any of the armed groups in northern Mali had the heavy missiles necessary to shoot down passenger planes at cruising altitudes.



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