

German Airbus crash in southern France kills 150

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The crash of an Airbus aircraft, en route from Spain to Germany, in southern France on Tuesday is the worst air disaster in recent German history.

All 150 onboard the plane, 144 passengers and six crew members, died when the plane suddenly lost altitude and plunged to the ground in a remote region of the French Alps midday Tuesday. Rescue helicopters have since landed at the site of the crash site. The helicopter crews confirmed that there were no survivors but were able to recover the black box of the aircraft.

According to Germanwings, the low cost airline run by Lufthansa, 67 Germans were among the victims, including 16 students and two teachers from the Westphalian city of Haltern. The 16 year olds and their teachers were on a return flight to Germany as part of a student exchange scheme with Spain. According to the government in Madrid, 45 Spanish passengers are also among the victims.

Flight 4U 9525 left Barcelona at 10:01 am local time on the way to Dusseldorf in Germany. At 10:45 am the aircraft reached its regular cruising altitude of 38,000 feet (11.5 kilometers). After a minute, it commenced a steep descent. According to Germanwings CEO Thomas Winkelmann: "This descent lasted eight minutes. Contact between the aircraft and French radar and ground control stopped at 10:53 am, at an altitude of about 6,000 feet. The aircraft then crashed". According to air traffic controllers the pilot of the Airbus had not notified ground control of the plane's sudden descent.

According to the French Secretary of State for Transport Alain Vidalies, the pilot sent an emergency call at 10:47 am, declaring that the aircraft was in an "abnormal situation". Minutes later the plane crashed. At 11:15 am a French police helicopter spotted a column of smoke in the region near Digne-les-Bains in

the department of Alpes-de-Haute-Provence.

The aircraft was a 24-year-old Airbus A320, delivered on February 6, 1991 to Lufthansa. It made its maiden flight on 29 November 1990 and was one of the oldest operating aircraft of this Airbus series. According to Lufthansa, the captain had 10 years of flying experience. Weather conditions were reportedly good and apparently played no role in the crash.

The Airbus A320 is one of the popular planes for world airlines and was the first plane to be installed with fly by wire (highly computerized) technology. A number of accidents involving the plane during past decades have been linked to problems related to the fly by wire technology.

A report in Spiegel Online indicated that technical problems may have played a role in the latest crash. According to the report, the Germanwings Airbus had spent several hours at Dusseldorf airport in the so-called AOG ("Aircraft on Ground") mode due to technical problems. Lufthansa confirmed that there had been a problem with the plane's nose landing door that opens and closes the fuselage when the nose wheel is down.

Some Germanwings aircrews at both Dusseldorf and Stuttgart airports refused to fly their planes Tuesday and a number of flights involving German Airbuses were canceled. Passengers waiting for their flights were informed by ground personnel that the crews had withdrawn to discuss the "flight readiness" of their planes. A Lufthansa spokesman confirmed that Germanwings crews had not taken up their positions "for personal reasons".

The latest crash takes place against the background of a longstanding industrial dispute between Lufthansa pilots and company management. Just last week the German pilots union Cockpit undertook the twelfth in a

series of selective strike actions since the dispute began.

A spokesman for Cockpit stated that, in light of Tuesday's crash, the union would put aside any plans for further industrial action in the near future.

The pilots have been protesting against plans to reduce pensions and worsen working conditions as part of the company's strategy to drastically cut costs. Lufthansa has announced its intention to expand its low cost subsidiaries Germanwings and Eurowings in a price war with other low-cost airlines, such as the Irish company Ryanair.



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