

International airlines avoid Egypt's Sinai after 224 die in Russian passenger jet crash

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Several international air carriers announced that they will avoid flying over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula until the cause is established for Saturday's crash there of a Russian passenger jet that killed all 224 people on board.

The crash, the worst disaster in Russian aviation history, resulted from "disintegration of the fuselage ... in the air," according to Viktor Sorochenko, director of the Intergovernmental Aviation Committee, which oversees air safety in Russia and a number of other former Soviet republics. He cautioned that it "is too early to draw conclusions."

The conclusion that the plane disintegrated in midair was drawn from the wide scattering of bodies and debris, with the body of a three-year-old girl found eight kilometers from the main crash site, and the plane's tail section falling at a distance from the rest of the fuselage.

Russian Transport Minister Maxim Sokolov stated that "in various media, there is information that the Russian aircraft was shot down by an anti-aircraft missile fired by terrorists. This information can not be considered accurate." The Egyptians, he added, do "not have any information that would confirm such insinuations."

Both Russian and Egyptian officials have sought to discourage speculation that the aircraft was brought down by a terrorist attack after elements claiming to represent the Islamist insurgent group Sinai Province claimed responsibility for the disaster.

A statement posted online in the name of the group, which has declared allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), said the alleged attack had been carried out "in response to Russian airstrikes that killed hundreds of Muslims on Syrian land."

Tension in the region has been heightened by the

conflicting military operations in Syria by Russia, which has come to the military aid of the government of President Bashar al-Assad, and the United States, which announced on Friday that it is deploying Special Forces troops in Syria to support militias in the northeast of the country.

Islamist militias have been clashing with Egyptian government troops in Sinai since the Egyptian revolution of 2011, and fighting has markedly intensified in the aftermath of the 2013 coup that overthrew Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Mursi.

The European Aviation Safety Agency warned last November that airlines flying over north Sinai at or below 26,000 feet were at risk because of the conflict in the area. Among the principal concerns is that the Islamist militias could use shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile systems, known as manpads, reportedly looted from the stockpiles of the former Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi, to bring down a passenger plane.

The downed Russian aircraft, however, was flying at its cruising altitude of 31,000 feet, above the range of manpads, when it lost radar contact and crashed into a remote mountainous area in central Sinai.

The Russian government declared a nationwide day of mourning Sunday in memory of the 217 passengers and seven crew members. In St. Petersburg, where the flight was returning loaded with vacationers from the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, the official mourning was extended for two more days.

Russian investigators, meanwhile, raided the Moscow offices of the Kogalymavia Russian airline company, which had operated the plane under its subsidiary Metrojet, according to the Russian news agency REN-TV. It said that they had seized documents and computer hard drives.

There were conflicting reports about the plane's condition and its final moments as investigators began to examine the aircraft's two black boxes, which were recovered from the crash site. The flight data and voice recorders as well as analysis of the plane's remains are expected to provide clues as to the cause of the disaster.

Built in 1997, the plane was one of the oldest A321s still flying, having logged 21,000 flights and 56,000 flight hours, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, which reported that the plane had been sold to the Turkish Onur Air and leased to both Saudi Arabian Airlines and Syria's Cham Wings, before being bought by Kogalymavia.

The *Journal*, citing the Flight Safety Foundation's Aviation Safety Network, reported that the plane had suffered "substantial damage" in a 2001 Cairo landing in which the tail struck the runway. The apparent separation of the tail from the rest of the plane, based upon the preliminary examination of the crash site, has drawn investigators' attention to the incident and the subsequent repair of the aircraft.

Inadequate repair of damage to aircraft bulkheads has been blamed for earlier disasters, including the 2002 crash of a China Airlines jumbo jet, which broke apart after takeoff from Taiwan. It is not yet known whether repairs to the Russian plane involved damage to its bulkhead.

The former wife of the lost plane's co-pilot told Russia's NTV that her husband had told her he had been worried about the aircraft's condition.

Dubai's Al-Arabiya television reported that the pilot had sought permission to land at a nearby airport complaining of mechanical problems shortly before the crash, a claim that has been denied by Egypt's Civil Aviation Minister Hossam Kamal.

Meanwhile, the commercial web site FlightRadar24.com, which tracks flight data, reported that shortly before it crashed into Sinai, the plane had climbed and descended wildly, dropping 6,000 feet in 22 seconds, climbing rapidly back up and then descending once again. It also reported that the plane's velocity dropped from 470 to 71 miles per hour, a speed that would not keep the Airbus 321 aloft.

The pattern was reportedly similar to that of an Air France A330 passenger jet that climbed and descended sharply and then lost speed, falling into the Atlantic en route from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to Paris, France in

June 2009, killing all 228 passengers and crew members.



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