

Algeria military plane crash kills 257

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On Wednesday, a military plane carrying soldiers and their family members crashed into a field shortly after takeoff a few miles from an airbase in Boufarik, Algeria, about 20 miles from capital city Algiers. Upon impact, the aircraft exploded into flames, killing 247 passengers, along with 10 crew members. Only a few have been reported to have survived. It is the deadliest crash in Algerian history.

The immediate cause of the disaster is as yet unknown. The head of the Algerian army, along with the vice-minister of defense visited the crash site, and told the media they would launch an investigation into the crash.

The plane was a Russian-made Ilyushin Il-76 military transport plane, an aircraft with a history of crashes. The most recent crash of an Il-76 was in 2016, when a plane crashed while flying a firefighting mission near Lake Baikal in Siberia, killing all 10 on board. In 2009, another Il-76 owned by the Iranian air force crashed near Varamin, in Tehran province, killing seven. Investigations conducted into the cause of both crashes resulted in inconclusive findings.

Algeria's previous most deadly crash occurred in 2003, when 102 people were killed when a commercial airliner crashed at the end of the runway of Tamanrasset airport in southern Algeria. In 2014, an Lockheed C-130 piloted by the Algerian air force personnel slammed into a mountainous region in Oum El Bouaghi province, killing more than 70.

Video images of billowing smoke from the aircraft and a line-up of body bags at the crash site appeared on Algerian news site *Algerie24*, and showed the plane split in half, with the front of the plane in flames. Witnesses reported observing the wing of the plane engulfed in flames before the aircraft took a dive and slammed into the field.

The Algerian defense ministry issued a statement, "The number of martyrs has risen to 247 passengers

and 10 members of the crew, most of whom are members of the army as well as their families." The government declared three days of national mourning.

In addition to Algerian military personnel, there were a number of militants with the Polisario Front, a Western Saharan paramilitary separatist group which has been embroiled in conflict with the Moroccan government since 1973, when the organization began with the aim of establishing an independent state in southern Morocco.

Beginning in the 1960s as a national liberation movement, the Polisario Front and its military wing, the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA), were largely drawn from the Sahrawi tribal population of the former Spanish Sahara. The Algerian government has long declared its backing for the militant group.

The defense ministry added that the plane was bound for the remote Algerian town of Tindouf along the Moroccan border, before heading south to Béchar. Tindouf, the first stop of the plane's itinerary, is the location of Sahrawi refugee camps set up in 1975 during the Western Saharan War. Algerian *Ennahar* Television reported that 26 of the passengers killed were Polisario returning to the Sahrawi refugee camps after seeking medical treatment at Algerian hospitals.

The largest African country by area, Algeria is rich in oil and gas deposits from which the majority of the population see little benefit. In recent years, the fall in oil prices has led to mass unemployment across Algeria's energy sector and fostered discontent towards the regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in particular among youth, who represent half of the country's 40 million residents.

Bouteflika's full-throated support for Washington's imperialist aims in the Maghreb, and across the broader African continent has contributed to his unpopularity. Algeria has deployed tens of thousands of its forces in support various US military efforts, most recently to

Mali and Libya. Additionally, Algeria allowed the CIA to place its Mahgreb-Sahel regional headquarters in the country.

With a poverty rate of 23.1 per cent, and chronically high youth unemployment, Algeria is a seething cauldron of social tension on the brink of explosion. Government cuts to fuel and food subsidies have only inflamed discontent within the masses.

A series of strikes have gripped the country in recent months. In February, teachers walked out across the country over low salary and poor working conditions, with schools in Algiers almost completely shut down for classes.

Doctors and medical personnel, along with medical students also walked out, leading to a court decision which ruled the strike illegal. In March, doctors and teachers defied the court order to return to work, and were joined by additional teachers and hospital workers who made the decision to strike. In response to the defiance of the court, police arrested and detained scores of teachers, doctors, and other medical workers.

The unrest by workers in Algeria has raised the specter of the so-called “Arab Spring”, the popular uprising that swept Northern Africa in 2011. The discontent brewing within the masses no doubt figures prominently into uncertainty and fear within the Algerian ruling elite of a mass social uprising that could sweep it from power.



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