Ninety-seven die in Pakistan International Airline crash

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A Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) plane crashed into a densely settled area near Karachi airport Friday afternoon, killing 97 of the 99 passengers and crew. Two passengers survived. No fatalities were confirmed on the ground, although many have been treated for injuries including burns. At least 19 houses were destroyed by the crashing aircraft.

The Airbus A320 aircraft was flying from Lahore to Karachi after flight restrictions imposed as part of Prime Minister Imran Khan's halfhearted lockdown measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic were lifted last week for domestic flights. Reportedly, the flight to Lahore was the second undertaken by this aircraft since the lockdown was lifted.

The flight data and cockpit voice recorders of the crashed aircraft were recovered late Friday from the crash site in Model Colony, a residential area just a few kilometers from the Karachi airport. They are being handed over to an inquiry board formed by the government under its Aircraft Accident Investigation Board (AAIB). The board is expected to deliver a preliminary report within a month.

The aircraft aborted its first attempt to land and crashed on its second attempt. There is no official explanation for the crash or the reasons for the failure of the first landing attempt. PIA CEO Arshad Malik claimed the aircraft was "technically fit for flying" and "there was no obvious reason of accident," according to Radio Pakistan. The pilots reported a "technical fault" prior to the crash, according to Malik. An unnamed senior civil aviation official who spoke with Reuters suggested the plane had been unable to lower its undercarriage during the first landing attempt.

Reporting in the local media is overshadowed by the accelerating spread of the coronavirus in the country, with deaths surpassing 1,150 during the weekend and over 55,000 cases. This is under conditions where Prime Minister Khan and his Islamic populist government have decided to end all lockdown measures and reopen markets and workplaces.

According to a statement by Airbus, the aircraft had recorded 47,100 flight hours and 25,860 flight cycles. It entered service in 2004 and had operated under the PIA banner since 2014. The aircraft is fitted with CFM56-5B4/P engines manufactured by CFM International, a joint venture by GE Aviation, a division of General Electric, and Safran Aircraft Engines.

A witness told Reuters that the aircraft "first hit a mobile tower and crashed over houses." Reportedly, the plane came down on a narrow lane, somewhat minimizing the impact on the houses. However, the rescue efforts were made difficult and delayed due to the poor state of infrastructure. Fire trucks and ambulances struggled to get near the crash site, leaving the initial response to nearby residents.

Most bodies recovered were charred beyond recognition and are now being kept in two Karachi hospital for the arrival of DNA records. Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan announced that 1 million rupees ($US6,206.61) would be paid to the families of each person who died in the crash and 500,000 rupees to each of the two survivors.

One survivor had a broken leg and other bruises but was reportedly in good condition. He is believed to have been thrown with his seat from the plane during the crash. The other survivor, Muhammad Zubair, shared his harrowing experience with GeoTV from his hospital bed where he is receiving treatment for burns to his legs and hands. Describing the first landing attempt, Zubair said, "When the pilot announced that we are landing in Karachi and he took the plane a bit down, two or three shocks were felt."

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The plane was in the air for 10 to 15 more minutes after its initial aborted landing attempt, according to eyewitnesses, but Flightradar24 data cited by Bloomberg shows it was nearing the ground five and a half minutes later. According to the rescue agency Edhi, some bodies recovered wore oxygen masks, indicating an emergency had been declared.

Zubair said there was a “hard crash” minutes after the pilots announced the second landing and he fell unconscious. When he came back to his senses he saw “smoke everywhere” and “could hear screams from all directions.” “I opened my seat belt and saw some light—I went towards the light. I had to jump down about 10 feet to get to safety,” Zubair said. According to him the flight had been smooth until it neared Karachi.

Dunya News, citing AAIB investigators, reported Sunday on scratch marks left by the aircraft on the runaway during its initial landing attempt without its landing gear lowered. The right engine touched ground first and then the left engine next.

The communication between air traffic controllers and the pilots in the last moments of the flight was reported by Reuters based on a recording released by the tracking website liveatc.net. “We are returning back, sir, we have lost engines,” presumably a pilot is heard in the recording while the controllers clear both runaways for its landing. Moments later the recording ends with the man calling, “Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!”

There have been several air disasters in the past decade in Pakistan. In 2016, a PIA flight crashed into a hillside, killing all 47 onboard. In 2012, a Bhoja Air flight crashed, killing all 127 onboard, leading to the shutdown of the privately-owned airline. In 2010, an Airblue flight, also privately owned, crashed, killing all 152 onboard in its attempt to land in dense fog and heavy monsoonal rain.

PIA has been a longstanding target of the International Monetary Fund for privatization, but successive governments failed to sell it due to popular opposition among workers as well as the masses. The present Tehreek-e-Insaaf government hired international auditors to conduct a fresh examination of the “loss-making” utility, as part of the country’s IMF bailout package of US$6 billion last year.

Bloomberg ranked PIA top of the list of airlines that it predicted will go bankrupt in the next two years. According to Bloomberg, a PIA representative said, “losses and debt have become too much for the company to handle.”

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