

Voice recorder found after fatal Air India accident

by Bloomberg on Sunday, 23 May 2010

Accident investigators found the cockpit voice recorder from the wreckage of an Air India Express Boeing Co aircraft that crashed yesterday, killing 158 passengers and crew.

Analysis of the fire damaged recorder may take about two weeks and is expected to provide the necessary details about the accident, the government said in a statement. Search teams were still looking for the main flight data recorder.

Speaking to reporters on Sunday in Mumbai, Harpreet Singh, Air India's emergency response coordinator for the disaster, said: "Officials from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation are searching for the black box. Until it's found and formal studies are done, we can't conclude anything."

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Flight IX 812 from Dubai to Mangalore slammed through a boundary wall and slid down a hill before bursting into flames at about 6:05 am yesterday in India's first fatal crash of a passenger aircraft in a decade. Flames and thick smoke billowed from the forested area.

All the bodies of the dead have been removed from the wreckage of the Boeing 737-800, Singh said. Of those, 87 have been identified. There were eight survivors.

The accident was the worst in India in 14 years, according to the Aviation Safety Network website.

A Houston, Texas based disaster management company, Kenyon International Emergency Services has been asked to assist in the rescue operation, Air India's Singh said. The airline will also conduct an internal inquiry.

Since India's last major air disaster in 2000, its skies have seen the arrival of Kingfisher Airlines Ltd, SpiceJet Ltd, IndiGo, GoAirlines (India) Pvt and Paramount Airways Ltd, as the world's second fastest expanding major economy after China saw demand surge.

India will be the fastest growing air travel market for the next 10 years, Airbus SAS, the world's biggest planemaker, predicts. The country's carriers will add \$138 billion of new aircraft over two decades, the company forecasts.

National Aviation Co of India Ltd, Air India's owner, is seeking to raise as much as \$1.15 billion to refinance loans that funded the purchase of 21 Airbus planes.

Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel said in March that India needs to more than quadruple the number of airports from the current 90 to meet the increased traffic.

Kapil Kaul, chief executive officer of the Indian unit of the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, said: "India's safety record has been as good as it gets."

He added that Mangalore's "tabletop" runway "has challenges and the experience of the pilot is critical."

Boeing is sending a team to provide technical assistance to the investigation at the invitation of Indian authorities, the Chicago based manufacturer said in a statement yesterday. Air India said the crashed 737 was about 2 1/2 years old.

Firefighters had to cross a railway and battle through trees to reach the wreckage, the CNN-IBN television channel reported yesterday. It showed a rescue worker carrying the foam covered body of young child up a mud bank away from the crash.

At least 50 victims were from the state of Kerala, Press Trust of India reported. Kerala relies on remittances from people working in the Middle East for a quarter of its economy.

Both pilots were experienced and had flown into Mangalore together on May 17, Air India's director for personnel,

Anup Srivastava, told reporters in Mumbai yesterday.

The civil aviation ministry said in a statement the plane had landed "slightly beyond" the runway's "touchdown" zone at a time when visibility was about six kilometers (four miles).

Yesterday's crash was the worst in India since a Saudi Arabian Airlines flight collided with a Kazakhstan Airlines jet in November, 1996, killing all 349 on board.

In the South Asian country's last major air disaster, a Boeing 737-200 crashed into a residential area while approaching Patna airport in the eastern Bihar in July 2000.

For loss making national carrier Air India the accident "comes at a time when it is struggling," analyst Kaul said.

He said: "This is going to be demotivating. While the incident may not affect their plans to raise capital, "they are going to be much more in focus for the wrong reasons."

International air travel has rebounded from last year's slump as the global economy expanded. Indian airlines carried 16.82 million passengers between January and April this year, 22 percent more than a year earlier, according to the Civil Aviation Ministry. (Reuters)

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