

No survivors found after Algerian airliner with 118 on board crashes in Mali

-, 25.07.2014, 18:24 Time

USPA News - Rescue workers have found no survivors after reaching the crash site of an Air Algerie passenger plane that crashed in northern Mali after encountering a storm, officials said on Friday, making it the country's worst ever aviation disaster with 118 fatalities. French soldiers reached the crash site on early Friday morning after a Burkinabe helicopter spotted the wreckage late Thursday.

"French soldiers who are already at the scene have secured the crash site and have started preliminary investigations," said French President François Hollande. "Unfortunately, there are no survivors." The McDonnell Douglas MD-83 aircraft - owned by Spanish charter company Swiftair and operated by Air Algerie under flight number AH5017 - disappeared from radar about 50 minutes after it took off from Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, at 0117 GMT on Thursday. It was en-route to Algiers, Algeria, with 112 passengers and six crew members on board. The aircraft was found "disintegrated" south of Gao, close to the Mali-Burkina Faso border near the town of Gossi. "The investigation is underway into the cause of this tragedy. One black box has been found and is on its way to Gao to be examined as soon as possible," Hollande said. Investigators from the French Civil Aviation Safety Investigation Authority (BEA) were also sent to the crash site, and Hollande said the agency was ready to lead the investigation if necessary. "What we know already is that the debris from the plane is concentrated in a limited area. It is still too early to draw any conclusions but they will come," he said. French and African officials have pointed to severe weather as a likely cause of the accident, but the French government has not ruled out any possible causes. "We think the crash is linked to the weather conditions. We can't exclude any theory until the investigation has come to a conclusion, but that's the most probable hypothesis," said French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve. Forecasters said the region in which the plane went down saw severe storms at the time of the crash. Speaking on Thursday, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said contact with the plane was lost after the crew requested a change of course due to weather, but it is unclear if the plane sent out any distress call. Swiftair's managing director also said it was too soon to determine the cause of the crash. "Our priority at this time is to assist the families of those involved and we remain at their disposal to provide any assistance they may require at this difficult time," the director said. "Swiftair will cooperate and furnish any assistance to the authorities in charge of the investigation to determine the cause of the accident." The nationalities of the passengers remained unclear on Friday, though nearly half of the passengers on board are known to have the French nationality. Swiftair initially said 116 people were on board the plane, including 50 French passengers, but the French government said Friday that the aircraft was carrying a total of 118 people, of whom 54 were French nationals. The Romanian government also said on Friday that it was no longer certain whether a Romanian national was on board the aircraft. "The representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Algeria stated that his information could not be confirmed so far and that there is conflicting information about the number of passengers and their nationalities," Romania's Foreign Ministry said by e-mail. Algerian officials previously noted that a number of passengers had dual nationality, which may explain the confusion. Swiftair's initial statement listed the passengers as 50 French, 24 Burkinabe, 8 Lebanese, 6 Algerians, 5 Canadians, 4 Germans, 2 Luxembourgers, 1 Malian, 1 Belgian, 1 Nigerian, 1 Cameroonian, 1 Egyptian, 1 Ukrainian, 1 Romanian, and 1 Swiss national. All six crew members are confirmed to be from Spain. With 118 fatalities in the crash of Flight AH5017, Thursday's accident was the worst aviation disaster in Mali's history, surpassing the crash of an Air Mali plane nearly three decades ago. That accident happened in February 1985 when an Antonov 24B aircraft went down near Timbuktu Airport, killing all but one of the 52 people on board.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2510/no-survivors-found-after-algerian-airliner-with-118-on-board-crashes-in-mali.html>

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.

3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com