

Russian airliner carrying 224 people crashes in Sinai

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Wreckage found of plane that crashed 23 minutes after takeoff from Sharm el-Sheikh; rescuers search for survivors; all on board were Russian nationals.

People gather at the airline information desk at of Russian airline Kogalymavia at Pulkovo airport in St.Petersburg, Russia, Saturday, Oct. 31, 2015, after a Russian airliner with 217 passengers and seven crew aboard crashed in the Sinai Peninsula. (AP Photo/Dmitry Lovetsky)

A Russian charter plane crashed early Saturday morning in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula some 23 minutes after takeoff, with 224 Russian nationals on board.

The office of Egyptian Prime Minister Sharif Ismail confirmed Saturday that a "Russian civilian plane" crashed in the central Sinai. Ismail canceled a trip to the Sinai city of Ismailia in the wake of the crash, Sky News Arabia said.

A senior aviation official said the plane was a charter flight operated by a Russian company and had on board 217 passengers and seven crew members. There were 17 children on the plane, according to the RT news channel.

A statement from the Ministry of Civil Aviation said military search and rescue teams found the wreckage of the passenger jet in the Hassana area south of the city of Al-Arish, an area in northern Sinai where Egyptian security forces are fighting a burgeoning Islamic militant insurgency led by a local affiliate of the extremist Islamic State group.

"Military planes have discovered the wreckage of the plane" in a mountainous area, and 45 ambulances have been directed to the site to evacuate dead and wounded," the statement said.

The time lapse between takeoff and losing contact with the aircraft means that the plane was possibly flying at a cruising altitude of some 30,000 feet when it crashed.

Militants in northern Sinai have not to date shot down commercial airliners or fighter-jets.

It is not immediately known whether there were any survivors. Egyptian search and rescue teams at the crash site said they were hoping to find people who were still alive, and reported hearing voices coming from the wreckage, Israel's Walla website said.

"There is another section of the plane that rescue teams have still be unable to access and we hope to find survivors there. We have heard people crying out from inside the wreckage," a member of a rescue team told reporters.

The Israel Air Force had helped Egypt to locate the wreckage, the Ynet news website said. Israel also offered further assistance to both Cairo and Moscow.

An official statement carried by Egypt's MENA news agency said the flight took off from Sharm el-Sheikh, a popular destination for Russian tourists, at 5:51 a.m. local time and disappeared from radar screens 23 minutes after takeoff. It said the plane had been bound for St. Petersburg.

Investigators were looking at human error or a technical problem as a cause of the crash, Channel 10 television said.

Security sources in Egypt said that the pilot had reported a technical problem to air traffic control and said he was planning to make an emergency landing. After that, nothing was heard from the plane.

Russian President Vladimir Putin sent his condolences to the families of those on the plane on Saturday, and has ordered an inquiry into the reasons for the crash, the Walla website reported. Egypt's new prosecutor-general, Nabil Sadek, has also ordered an investigation and dispatched a team to the crash site, Ynet reported.

Earlier in the day, an Egyptian official with the government's Incidents Committee had told local media that the plane had briefly lost contact and was now safely in Turkish airspace.

- The Times of Israel