Over 100 dead after Boeing 737 crashes shortly after take off from Jose Marti airport in Cuba's Hava

19/05/2018 09:24 by admin

Four crash survivors were taken to a Havana hospital, and three remained alive as of mid-afternoon, hospital director Martinez Blanco told Cuban state TV.

Forensic investigators and Ministry of Interior officers sift through the remains of a Boeing 737 that plummeted into a yuca field with more than 100 passengers on board, in Havana, Cuba, Friday, May 18, 2018. The Cuban airliner crashed just after takeoff from Havanaâ€™s international airport.

Havana: An aging Boeing 737 with 110 people aboard crashed and burned shortly after taking off from Havanaâ€™s airport, leaving three survivors and investigators sifting through debris for clues as to what caused the airliner to go down.

It was Cubaâ€™s worst aviation disaster in three decades and its third major air accident since 2010. Skies were overcast and rainy at the airport at the time of Fridayâ€™s disaster and Cuban state television said the 39-year-old jet veered sharply to the right after departing on a domestic flight to the eastern city of Holguin.

â€œThe only thing we heard, when we were checking in, an explosion, the lights went out in the airport and we looked out and saw black smoke rising and they told us a plane had crashed,â€• Argentine tourist Brian Horanbuena told The Associated Press at the airport.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said a special commission had been formed to find the cause of the crash. The plane had 104 mainly Cuban passengers and six crew members.

â€œThings have been organized, the fire has been put out, and the remains are being identified,â€• he said.

State airline Cubana, which operated the flight, has had a generally good safety record but is notorious for delays and cancellations and has taken many of its planes out of service because of maintenance problems in recent months, prompting it to hire charter aircraft from other companies.

Mexican officials said the Boeing 737-201 was built in 1979 and rented by Cubana from Aerolineas Damojh, a small charter company that also goes by the name Global Air.

Rescue and search workers on the site where a Cuban airliner with more than 100 passengers on board plummeted into a yuca field just after takeoff from the international airport in Havana, Cuba, Friday

Cubana Flight 972 went down just after noon a short distance from the end of the runway at Jose Marti International Airport. Firefighters rushed to extinguish the flames that engulfed the debris left where jet hit the ground in a cassava field.

Four crash survivors were taken to a Havana hospital, and three remained alive as of late Friday. State media reports stopped short of openly declaring that the rest on board were dead, but there was no word of other survivors by Friday night.

Relatives of those aboard were ushered into a private area at the terminal to await word on their loved ones.

â€œMy daughter is 24, my God, sheâ€™s only 24!â€• cried Beatriz Pantoja, whose daughter Leticia was on the plane.

A statement from Mexicoâ€™s Transportation Department identified the pilot and co-pilot as Capt. Jorge Luis Nunez Santos and first officer Miguel Angel Arreola Ramirez. It said the flight attendants were Maria Daniela Rios, Abigail Hernandez Garcia and Beatriz Limon. Global Air said maintenance worker Marco Antonio Lopez Perez was also aboard.

Outside the companyâ€™s Mexico City offices, former Global Air flight attendant Ana Marlen Covarrubias said she had worked for the company for over seven years and knows nearly all the crew members.

â€œI donâ€™t have the words. Iâ€™m very sad. Weâ€™re in mourning,â€• she said in tears. â€œIt was something really, really, really terrible; a tragedy for us.â€•

In addition to the Mexican crew, Cuban Communist Party newspaper Granma reported that the passengers were mostly Cubans plus five foreigners from countries it did not identify. Argentinaâ€™s Foreign Ministry said two of its citizens had died in the crash.

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In November 2010 a Global Air flight originating in Mexico City made an emergency landing in Puerto Vallarta because its front landing gear did not deploy. The fire was quickly extinguished, and none of the 104 people aboard were injured. That plane was a 737 first put into service in 1975.

Mexican aviation authorities said a team of experts would fly to Cuba on Saturday to take part in the investigation.

First Vice President Salvador Valdes Mesa had met with Cubana officials on Thursday to discuss improvements to its service. The airline blames its spotty record on a lack of parts and airplanes because of the U.S. trade embargo against the communist-run country.

Last year a Cuban military plane crashed into a hillside in the western province of Artemisa, killing eight soldiers. In 2010, an AeroCaribbean flight from Santiago to Havana went down in bad weather, killing all 68 people on board, including 28 foreigners, in what was the countryâ€™s worst air disaster in more than two decades.

The last deadly accident involving a Cubana-operated plane was in 1989, when a charter flight from Havana to Milan, Italy, crashed shortly after takeoff, killing all 126 people on board and at least two dozen on the ground.

- AP