

Plane crashes into Mekong river in Laos, killing all 49 on board

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USPA News - A Lao Airlines passenger plane flying in stormy weather crashed into the Mekong river in southern Laos on Wednesday, killing all 49 people on board in the country's worst ever aviation disaster, the airline and foreign governments confirmed on Thursday. The accident happened at around 4 p.m. local time on Wednesday when Lao Airlines flight QV301 was preparing to land at the international airport in Pakse, the capital of southern Champasak province.

It was on a domestic flight from the country's capital, Vientiane, where it took off at 2:45 p.m. local time. "Upon preparing to land at Pakse Airport the aircraft ran into extreme bad weather conditions and was reportedly crashed into the Mekong River," the airline said in a press statement. It added that there were no known survivors but that it was coordinating rescue units "in the hope of finding survivors." But Lao authorities told foreign governments that they did not expect any survivors, and witnesses reported seeing scores of bodies near the crash site. The airline said the aircraft was carrying 44 passengers and 5 crew members, putting the death toll at 49 and making it the country's worst ever aviation disaster. State-run media said the aircraft was about to land when it was hit by strong winds, causing the front of the plane to move up and pushing the aircraft away from the airport. It said the aircraft had crashed about 2 kilometers (1.2 mile) from the airport, but foreign governments were told the crash site is about 8 kilometers (4.9 miles) from the runway. Most of the passengers were foreigners, according to a passenger manifest released by the state-run airline. The manifest listed the passengers as 17 Lao, seven French, five Australians, five Thai citizens, three South Koreans, two Vietnamese, one Canadian, one Chinese, one Taiwanese, one Malaysian, and one American. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius confirmed seven French citizens had been killed in the plane crash. "My first thoughts are with the families and loved ones of the victims to whom I extend my condolences," he said, adding that the foreign ministry had mobilized its crisis center. French President François Hollande said he learned of the news with "deep emotion and great sadness," according to an e-mailed statement from the presidential palace. "He extends his condolences to the families and friends of the victims and expresses his full support," the statement said. "Faced with this tragedy, the French authorities are fully mobilized to assist and support the families." In Australia, a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) confirmed six Australian citizens were listed as having boarded the doomed flight. "Australian consular officials are in contact with the families of those thought to be on the flight," he said. "Lao authorities have told our embassy in Vientiane they do not expect any survivors." The Chinese Ambassador to Laos, Guan Huabing, said his embassy in Vientiane had activated its emergency plan and was working with Lao Airlines, the Lao Foreign Affairs Ministry, and other departments. "After verification, the aircraft is known to have two Chinese passengers, one of whom is from Taiwan," the embassy said in a statement, adding that it was in contact with their relatives. The ATR 72-600 twin turboprop engine aircraft, which can be configured to carry between 68 and 74 passengers, had only been delivered from the production line in March of this year. "The concerns and sympathy of ATR go to the families, friends and loved ones affected by the accident," said David Vargas, a spokesman for the aircraft manufacturer. Vargas said the France-based company will provide full assistance to the French Bureau of Enquiry and Analysis for Civil Aviation Safety (BEA), which will also investigate Wednesday's accident. BEA said in a statement that it has established a team of four investigators who will travel to Laos, although the local authorities will lead the investigation. Lao Airlines said it would present the initial findings from its investigation on Thursday, but local authorities indicated that the stormy weather was likely to blame. "We are doing our best to investigate the cause of the crash and we hope to disclose our findings by Thursday," the airline said. Wednesday's accident was the country's worst ever aviation disaster, surpassing the death toll from the August 1954 crash of an Air Vietnam cargo plane. The freighter was evacuating families of Vietnamese soldiers from northern Vietnam to southern Vietnam when one of its two engines failed, causing it to crash into a tributary of the Mekong river near Pakse after being hit by a sudden storm.

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