

Crash toll remains unclear as Nigeria plumbs jet debris



US citizens were among the 153 known casualties

LAGOS, Nigeria - A crane hoisted the tail section of a commercial jet from the smoldering debris of a shattered neighborhood Monday in a search for the dead from a crash that killed all 153 people aboard and an unknown number on the ground.

Apartment buildings, small businesses, and roadside shops were smashed to bricks and rubble Sunday when the Dana Air MD-83 plowed into the area about 5 miles short of Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos.

Pilots on the flight from Nigeria's capital of Abuja to its largest city of Lagos radioed the tower that they had engine trouble shortly before the crash, but the exact cause remained unclear. The weather was clear at the time.

Some US citizens were aboard the flight, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said, but he could not provide a firm number. Others killed in the crash included at least four Chinese citizens, two Lebanese citizens, and one French citizen, officials said.

President Goodluck Jonathan wept Monday as he visited the Iju-Ishaga neighborhood, where emergency workers labored. A backhoe clawed at the debris looking for the dead.

Jonathan pledged to make air travel safer, but the crash called into question the government's ability to protect its citizens and enforce regulations in a nation with a history of aviation disasters.

By nightfall, searchers with police dogs recovered 137 bodies, including those of a woman cradling an infant, according to Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency. Rescuers acknowledged they still didn't

know how many people died in the wrecked apartments and smaller tin-roofed buildings along the narrow streets of Iju-Ishaga.

"The fear is that since it happened in a residential area, there may have been many people killed," said Yushau Shuaib, a federal emergency management spokesman.

Lagos state, home to 17.5 million people, has grown rapidly in recent years and soon will be home to the most populous city in all of Africa. Massive migration and urban sprawl have brought residential neighborhoods to the boundaries of the airport.

Boeing said in a statement on its website that the company is ready to provide technical assistance to the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority through the US National Transportation Safety Board. Dana Air said an investigation was underway with US officials assisting the Nigerian government.

On April 19, 2010, the same plane made an emergency landing in Lagos due to loss of engine power after a bird strike following takeoff, according to the Aviation Safety Network.

The plane was exported to Nigeria in early 2009. It was first delivered in 1990 with the US registration number N944AS to Alaska Airlines and had two minor incidents while in the Seattle-based airline's service, according to databases of the Federal Aviation Administration and the Aviation Safety Network.

<http://bostonglobe.com/news/world/2012/06/04/crews-search-for-dead-after-plane-crash-nigeria/CdNXj2oQpKtV9PN5i27D7J/story.html>