

International

Eight feared dead as Russia tourist copter crashes into lake

Horrible weather conditions mar rescue operation

MOSCOW: A helicopter carrying 16 tourists and crew on a sightseeing trip in Russia's far east crashed into a lake yesterday, leaving eight people including a child feared dead and two others in serious condition. The Mi-8 helicopter crash-landed into the icy waters of Kuril Lake in the mountainous Kamchatka peninsula in poor visibility and sank, local authorities said. Staff of the Kronotsky Nature Reserve dispatched boats to the crash site and saved eight people, two of whom are now in intensive care with various injuries. Survivors praised wildlife inspectors for coming to their rescue in a matter of minutes.

"This situation is close to a miracle," said governor Vladimir Solodov. The other eight—including the only child on board and the crew commander—were missing and feared dead.

"We don't have any information about the rest," the governor's spokeswoman, Alla Golovan, told AFP. The wreckage of the helicopter was now lying at a depth of more than 130 meters (420 feet) some 700 meters from the shore, the emergencies ministry said. Rescuers and divers were dispatched to the scene but they did not have the necessary equipment to begin work at that depth. Solodov said the authorities turned to the defense ministry, which sent the necessary underwater equipment. "Robots will be studying the bottom of Kuril Lake at the site of the crash," the governor said.

Rescued from icy water

Recounting the crash and subsequent rescue operation, wildlife inspectors said that the visibility at the lake was no greater than 100 meters, adding that they heard the helicopter but could not see it. When staff of the reserve heard a loud "boom", they said they dispatched two mo-

torboats with four inspectors, who reached the scene in about three to four minutes. "Eight people were on the surface, who we immediately lifted onboard," inspector Yevgeny Denges said in a statement. The inspectors looked for other survivors but could not find anyone, Denges added. Citing the survivors, the nature reserve said that the chopper began to sink nose first and the passengers managed to swim up to the surface from a depth of eight to nine meters.

"The water temperature in the lake is no more than 5-6 degrees (Celsius, 41-43 degrees Fahrenheit), it is impossible to remain in it for a long time," the reserve said. The tourists were from Russia's second city Saint Petersburg. One of the survivors, Viktor Strelkin, said that at the time of the accident he was sleeping and woke up when a stream of water hit him in the face.

"My friend's son was sitting next to me. He was fastened with a security belt and I did not have time to yank him out because I woke up too late," Strelkin said in remarks released by authorities.

'Horrible weather conditions'

Strelkin, who practices free-diving, managed to unfasten himself, breathe in some air before the cabin filled with water, get out of the aircraft and swim up to the surface. Another survivor, state TV presenter Nikolai Korzhenevsky, appeared to blame the crew for the accident. "For some reason we flew there even though we knew about the horrible weather conditions there," he said. Kamchatka is a vast peninsula popular with adventure tourists for its abundant wildlife, live volcanoes and black sand beaches. The aircraft belongs to a firm called Vityaz-Aero, co-owned by local lawmaker Igor Redkin. Earlier this



PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMCHATSKIY, Russia: This handout photograph taken and released by the Kamchatka regional government yesterday shows Emergency Situations Ministry workers taking part in the rescue operation at the spot where a Mi-8 helicopter crash-landed into Kuril Lake in the Kronotsky nature reserve on the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia outside Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. —AFP

week, Redkin made headlines in Russia when he admitted to killing a man he mistook for a bear.

Officials said the helicopter had been in operation since 1984 but was in good condition. The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it was looking into a potential violation of air safety rules. The regional prosecutor's office launched a probe to study "the implementation of the legislation on the provision of tourist services".

In July, a small plane crashed on the peninsula, killing 19 people when it flew into a cliff. Airplane crashes are fairly common in Russia due to poor maintenance and lax compliance with safety rules. —AFP

Ship snaps in two off Japan coast, crew safe

TOKYO: A cargo ship ran aground and broke into two off northern Japan, the coastguard said yesterday, with the crew of the Panama-flagged vessel taken to safety. Aerial images showed the separated stern of the Crimson Polaris tipped upwards and the other part of the stricken boat listing into the sea.

A fuel leak from the ship has spread around 24 kilometers (15 miles), a coastguard spokesman told AFP, but the extent of any environmental impact was unclear. "Crimson Polaris ran aground in Hachinohe port in Aomori," said the spokesman, who declined to be named.

"All the 21 crew members — Chinese and Filipino — were rescued safely," he said. Three patrol boats and three air-



HACHINOHE, Japan: The Panamanian-registered Crimson Polaris ship running aground in Hachinohe, Aomori prefecture yesterday. —AFP

craft were dispatched after the ship ran aground on Wednesday in the port off Japan's northeastern coast.

Authorities were trying to contain the oil leak but had not yet been able to erect an oil fence around the boat, the spokesman said. "The patrol boats will operate overnight" to avoid collisions, he said, adding that no other ship was known to be involved in the accident. —AFP

Russia arrests hypersonics scientist suspected of treason

MOSCOW: Russia yesterday arrested the head of a research institute specializing in hypersonics technologies on charges of treason, Russian news agencies reported. The latest arrest of a scientist suspected of treason comes as Russia has jumped out in front of other major world powers in the race to develop a range of new hypersonic weapons that President Vladimir Putin has dubbed "invincible".

Citing sources in security services, the Interfax and TASS news agencies reported that hypersonics scientist Alexander Kuranov was arrested during a special operation by the FSB domestic intelligence agency. The press service of Moscow's Lefortovsky district court confirmed the arrest to the news agencies.

Kuranov, 73, is accused of passing "secret information" related to his research to a "foreign citizen", but the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported that beyond that the details of the case will not be made public.

Treason cases in Russia, which carry charges of 12 to

20 years behind bars, are typically classified. Kuranov heads the Research and Development Enterprise of Hypersonic Systems based in Russia's second city of Saint Petersburg. According to a biography posted on the company's website, Kuranov is the author of more than 120 scientific papers and leads research on hypersonic technologies. It adds that he "takes part in international associations" and "conducts works on the purchase orders of many countries around the world". Last month Russia successfully tested the Zircon, a ship-launched hypersonic missile travelling at seven times the speed of sound.

If more tests are successful, the missile will join Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles and the air-launched Kinzhal (Dagger) missiles in Russia's arsenal of hypersonic weapons. There is no evidence, however, that Kuranov took part in the development of the missiles.

His case is the latest in a wide range of Russians including scientists who have been accused of high treason or disclosing state secrets in recent years.

In April, Russia arrested a physics professor, Valery Golubkin, on suspicion of treason, who was mainly employed by the Zhukovsky Central Aerohydrodynamic Institute (TsAGI). Another employee of TsAGI, Anatoly Gubanov, was arrested in December on suspicion of treason for having allegedly handed over classified information to the West. The physicist specialized in hypersonic aircraft. —AFP