

International

Bodies pulled from wreckage of crashed Nepalese plane

Aircraft made its first flight more than 40 years ago

POKHARA, Nepal: Nepali rescuers have retrieved the bodies of all but one of 22 people on board a plane that crashed into a Himalayan mountainside over the weekend, the army said Monday. Air traffic control lost contact with the Twin Otter plane operated by Nepali carrier Tara Air shortly after it took off from Pokhara in western Nepal on Sunday morning headed for Jomsom, a popular trekking destination.



“Flight seems to have collided with a big rock”

Resuming a search on Monday after failing to find any trace a day earlier, the army shared on social media a photo of aircraft parts and other debris littering a sheer mountainside, including a wing with the registration number 9N-AET clearly visible. “Twenty-one bodies have been recovered and teams are searching for the remaining one,” Nepal Army spokesman Narayan Silwal told AFP. “It is a very difficult area to work. The aircraft is several pieces scattered all over the slope,” a police official at the crash site said.

About 60 people were involved in the operation, including the army, police, mountain guides and locals, most of whom trekked uphill for miles on foot to get there. The civil aviation authority said the plane “met an accident” at 14,500 feet (4,420 m) in the Sanosware area of Thasang municipality. “Analyzing the pictures we received, it seems that the flight did not catch fire. Everything is scattered in the site. The flight seems to have collided with a big rock on the hill,” said Pokhara Airport spokesman Dev Raj Subedi.

Families

Four Indians were onboard, as well as two Germans, with the remainder Nepalis including a computer engineer, his wife and their two daughters who had just



MUSTANG, Nepal: The wreckage of a Twin Otter aircraft, operated by Nepali carrier Tara Air is seen on a mountainside on May 30, 2022, a day after it crashed.— AFP

returned from the United States. The four Indians were a divorced couple and their daughter and son, aged 15 and 22, going on a family holiday. Indian police official Uttam Sonawane told AFP. “There was a court order for (the father) to spend time with the family for 10 days every year, so they were taking a trip,” Sonawane said. According to the Aviation Safety Network website, the aircraft was made by Canada’s de Havilland and made its first flight more than 40 years ago.

Past crashes

Tara Air is a subsidiary of Yeti Airlines, a privately owned domestic carrier that services many remote destinations across Nepal. It suffered its last fatal accident in 2016 on the same route when a plane with 23 on board crashed into a mountainside in Myagdi district. Nepal’s air industry has boomed in recent years, carrying goods and people between hard-to-reach areas as well as foreign trekkers and climbers.

But it has long been plagued by poor safety due to insufficient training and maintenance. The European Union has banned all Nepali airlines from its airspace over safety concerns.

The Himalayan country also has some of the world’s most remote and tricky runways, flanked by snow-capped peaks with approaches that pose a challenge even for accomplished pilots. The weather can also change quickly in the mountains, creating treacherous flying conditions.

In March 2018, a US-Bangla Airlines plane crashed near Kathmandu’s notoriously difficult international airport, killing 51 people and seriously injuring 20. That accident was Nepal’s deadliest since 1992, when all 167 people aboard a Pakistan International Airlines plane died when it crashed on approach to Kathmandu airport. Just two months earlier a Thai Airways aircraft had crashed near the same airport, killing 113 people.— AFP

Scores quarantined after Beijing man breaks COVID rules

BEIJING: A Beijing man has landed thousands of his neighbors in quarantine after he ignored an order to stay at home and later tested positive for COVID-19, prompting a police investigation. The Chinese capital has ordered hundreds of thousands of residents to stay home over the last five weeks to curb its largest coronavirus outbreak since the start of the pandemic.

Officials said Sunday a man in his 40s surnamed Sun had failed to follow a requirement to isolate that he was given after he visited a shopping center considered high-risk. “During the home isolation period he... went out many times and walked in the neighborhood,” said Beijing public security official Pan Xuhong. Sun and his wife later tested positive, prompting authorities to lock down 5,000 of their neighbors at home and send 250 to a government quarantine center.

It came as virus restrictions began to be eased in Beijing on Monday, with authorities re-opening parks, museums and cinemas and declaring the outbreak under control. China is wedded to a zero-COVID strategy of hard lockdowns, mass testing and long quarantine periods to wipe out clusters as they emerge. There are

Sri Lanka police tear-gas students in fresh clashes

COLOMBO: Police fired tear gas to disperse thousands of students trying to storm the Sri Lankan president’s home Sunday as the government offered an olive branch to demonstrators demanding his resignation. Anti-riot squads used water cannon followed by tear gas, as furious protesters pulled down yellow iron barricades across a road leading to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s official residence in Colombo.

Nearby, thousands of men and women demonstrated for the 51st straight day outside Rajapaksa’s seafar office, demanding he step down over the country’s worst economic crisis since independence. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe went on national television on Sunday evening offering young protesters a greater say in how the country is administered. “The youth are calling for a change in the existing system,” Wickremesinghe said, laying out plans for 15 committees that would work with parliament to decide national policies.

“I propose to appoint four youth representatives to each of the 15 committees,” he said, adding that they could be drawn from the current protesters. The demonstrations led to tense scenes in Colombo, where authorities struggled to disperse large crowds and chemical irritants hung over the streets. Several men were seen picking up canisters spewing tear gas and throwing them back towards the police who fired them.

Female medical and science students joined the protests, with many running for cover when authorities unleashed water cannon. Wickremesinghe is not from Rajapaksa’s party, but was given the job after the president’s elder brother Mahinda resigned as prime minister on May 9 following weeks of protests, and when no other legislator agreed to step in. Wickremesinghe is the sole parliamentary representa-

tive of the United National Party, a once-powerful political force that was nearly wiped out in Sri Lanka’s last elections.

Rajapaksa’s party, which has a majority in the legislature, has offered to provide him with the necessary support to run a government. Sunday’s student action came a day after a similar clash when protesters tried to storm Rajapaksa’s heavily guarded colonial-era official residence, where he has bunkered down since thousands surrounded his private home on March 31.

An unprecedented shortage of foreign exchange to import even the most essential supplies, including food, fuel and medicines, has led to severe hardships for the country’s 22 million people. The government last month asked the International Monetary Fund for urgent financial assistance. Talks are continuing. The country has defaulted on its \$51 billion foreign debt. Its currency has depreciated by 44.2 percent against the US dollar this year, while inflation hit a record 33.8 percent last month.— AFP



COLOMBO: Police use tear gas shells to disperse students taking part in an anti-government protest demanding the resignation of Sri Lanka’s President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on May 29, 2022.— AFP

Discussion of the 1989 crackdown is all but forbidden in mainland China. But in semi-autonomous Hong Kong, its history was often taught in schools and advocacy for ending the rule of the Chinese Communist Party was alive and kicking - until the imposition of the security law. In the space of months, decades of commemoration have been wiped out as authorities wield the law to refashion Hong Kong in Beijing’s authoritarian image.

The Hong Kong Alliance, the most prominent Tiananmen advocacy group and the candlelight vigil organizer, was prosecuted as a “foreign agent” over incitement to subversion. Last September, its leaders were arrested, their June 4 Museum was shuttered after a police raid, and digital records of the crackdown were deleted overnight under a police order to close the group’s website and social media accounts.

For others, much like the organizers of the masses, uncertainty over where the new red lines fall has been enough to make them pull back. Six universities removed June 4 monuments that had stood on their campuses for years - just before Christmas last year, three were whisked away within 48 hours. The “Pillar of Shame” in the University of Hong Kong (HKU), an eight-meter-high sculpture by Danish artist Jens Galschiot, was dismantled, tucked into a cargo container and left on an HKU-owned plot of rural land.

Xi welcomes Hong Kong leader, hails ‘new atmosphere’

BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping has met with Hong Kong’s next leader in Beijing, telling John Lee he has the full trust of the central government, state media said Monday. Lee travelled to the capital on Saturday to receive Beijing’s blessing as he prepares to take office in a month. The 64-year-old former security chief, who oversaw a crackdown on Hong Kong’s democracy movement, was chosen as the next chief executive by a small committee of Beijing loyalists in early May. “I believe that the administration of the new government will definitely bring forth a new atmosphere, and compose a new chapter in Hong Kong’s development,” Xi said, according to official news agency Xinhua. Lee will assume office on July 1, which is the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong’s transfer from British to Chinese rule and the halfway point of its “One Country, Two Systems” political model.

Hong Kong has never been a democracy - the source of years of public frustration and protests - but China agreed that Hong Kong could maintain certain freedoms and autonomy for 50 years after its handover. According to Xinhua, Xi said Lee has the “courage to take responsibility” and “had made contributions to safeguarding national security and Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability”. “The central government fully affirms and fully trusts you,” Xi added. Lee was the sole candidate in the race to succeed outgoing leader Carrie Lam at a time when Hong Kong is being remolded in China’s authoritarian image. According to a statement from the Hong Kong government, Lee said in the meeting that he was “deeply honored by the appointment and fully aware of the great responsibility upon me”. He promised to “unite all sectors” and bring the government and people together to “strive for the well-being of Hong Kong and its people”. “Together, we will build Hong Kong into a city with long-term prosperity and a caring and inclusive society,” he added.—AFP

Tiananmen masses axed in Hong Kong

HONG KONG: For the first time in 33 years, church services to commemorate the Tiananmen crackdown will not be held in Hong Kong, erasing one of the last reminders of China’s bloody suppression of the 1989 protests. Since Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law in 2020 to snuff out pro-democracy demonstrations, once-packed candlelit vigils have been banned, a Tiananmen museum has been forced to close, and statues have been pulled down.

The annual Catholic masses were one of the last ways for Hong Kongers to come together publicly to remember the deadly clampdown in Beijing on June 4, 1989, when the Chinese government set tanks and troops on peaceful demonstrators. But this year, they too have been cancelled over fears of falling foul of Hong Kong authorities.

“We find it very difficult under the current social atmosphere,” said Reverend Martin Ip, chaplain of the Hong Kong Federation of Catholic Students - one of the organizers. “Our bottom line is that we don’t want to breach any law in Hong Kong,” he told AFP. The Diocese, whose Justice and Peace Commission was a co-organizer, said its frontline colleagues were concerned they might violate Hong Kong law.

Decades erased in months

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At Lingnan University, a wall relief by artist Chen Weiming was banished to an underground storage room. His “Goddess of Democracy” statue at the Chinese University of Hong Kong was sent to a secretive “safe place”. “They are trying to wipe out a shameful episode in history when the state committed a crime on its people,” Chen told AFP. The universities said they had never consented to the statues’ presence, and that their removal was based on an assessment of legal risk.—AFP



SUVA: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama arrive for a joint press conference on May 30, 2022.— AFP

Pacific nations reject China security pact

SUVA: Ten Pacific island nations rebuffed China’s push for a wide-ranging regional security pact Monday, amid worries the proposal was designed to pull them into Beijing’s orbit. Talks in Fiji between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and leaders from the small island nations failed to reach an agreement, in a high-profile diplomatic setback for Beijing.

China is offering to radically ramp up its activities in the South Pacific, directly challenging the influence of the United States and its allies in the strategically vital region. The proposed pact would see Beijing train Pacific island police, become involved in cybersecurity, expand political ties, conduct sensitive marine mapping and gain greater access to natural resources on land and in the water.

As an enticement, Beijing is offering millions of dollars in financial assistance, the prospect of a potentially lucrative China-Pacific islands free trade agreement and access to China’s vast market of 1.4 billion people. Behind the scenes, Pacific leaders have voiced deep misgivings about the offer. In a recent letter to fellow leaders, David Panuelo, the President of the Federated States of Micronesia, warned the offer was “disingenuous” and would “ensure Chinese influence in government” and “economic control” of key industries.

A more soft-spoken public rebuke came after the talks, when leaders said they could not agree to Beijing’s proposed “Common Development Vision” due to a lack of regional consensus. “As always, we put consensus first,” co-host and Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama said after the meeting, indicating that broad accord would be needed before inking any “new regional agreements”.

Papua New Guinea, Samoa and the Federated States of Micronesia were said to be among those concerned about the proposals, along with Taiwan-recognising Palau, which was not invited. “We would rather deal with our own security issues with China,” Papua New Guinea Foreign Minister Soroi Eoe told AFP, indicating concern about any region-wide pact.

Chinese officials - working frantically to secure support during Wang’s 10-day diplomatic blitz of the region - admitted their entreaties had fallen short. “There has been general support from the 10 countries,” Chinese ambassador to Fiji Qian Bo told reporters in Suva. “But of course, there are some concerns on some specific issues and we have agreed that these two documents will be discussed afterwards until we have reached an agreement.” Speaking from Suva, Wang made the face-saving announcement that the 10 countries had agreed to memorandums of understanding on China’s “Belt and Road” infrastructure initiative.—AFP