

## Nepal plane crash kills 18, probe ordered

Eighteen people, mostly Western tourists, were killed when a small plane crashed and went up in flames in Nepal's mountainous north Wednesday while the country was busy celebrating Dashain, its biggest festival.

The 9N-AFE Twin Otter belonging to the private Nepali airline, Yeti Airlines, had 19 people on board when the accident took place at Lukla in Solukhumbu district. All but the pilot were killed.

The 18 victims included 12 Germans on holiday, two Australians, two Nepali trekking guides and two members of the crew.

Pilot Surendra Kunwar was the lone survivor of the crash that killed co-pilot Bikash Pant and cabin attendant Sunita Shrestha.

In a quick reaction, the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal named a five-member inquiry committee, headed by attorney-general Pushpa Raj Koirala, to probe the accident and submit its report within two months.

This is the first aviation disaster suffered by Nepal's one-month-old Maoist government.

Mohan Adhikari, general manager at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu, said the plane crashed while attempting to land at Lukla in Solukhumbu.

Solukhumbu is regarded as the gateway to Mt Everest and other Himalayan ranges.

The aircraft had taken off from Kathmandu at 6.51 a.m. and was going to land at the Tenzing-Hillary Airport, one of the most difficult airports in the world, around 7.31 a.m. when the weather deteriorated, causing the pilot to overshoot the narrow runway and hit the fencing.

Eyewitnesses said the plane burst into flames immediately and most of the bodies were charred beyond recognition.

Yeti Airlines released the names of the passengers, who include seven women.

The list identified the German victims as: M Wiess (F), H. Wiess, A. Thiele (F), U. Thiele, T. Krause, S. Krause (F), B. Thorsten, N. Jankoster (F), A. Blomke, S. Blomke (F), A. Langanke (F), and J. Sauter.

The two Australian passengers were A. Frick and C. Kate (F). The two Nepali guides were identified as Govinda Sharma and Santosh Adhikari.

The pilot was rescued from the blazing cockpit and airdashed to the capital for treatment where he was declared to be 'miraculously' out of danger.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' held an emergency meeting with Home Minister Bamdev Gautam to discuss the lack of modern equipment at the domestic terminals and the need to upgrade them.

The Nepal Army was entrusted with the task of bringing the bodies back to Kathmandu, where they were sent to the Teaching Hospital for autopsy. After the examinations, the remains of the tourists would be handed over to officials from their respective embassies.

Yeti Airlines, a leading domestic flight operator, had tied up with Air Arabia this year to form FlyYeti, a low-cost international airline.

Nepal has a long history of air disasters, mostly caused by bad weather and human error. In March, 10 UN staffers were killed when the helicopter ferrying them to the capital from a Maoist army cantonment crashed in Ramechhap district east of Kathmandu.

In October 2006, the world was shocked by a crash in eastern Nepal in which 24 people were killed, including Nepal's leading conservationists, WWF officials and a Nepali minister and his wife.

*Sudeshna Sarkar* ( © IANS / India eNews)