

Nepal plane crash victims kin demand answers

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Kathmandu: Relatives of the 18 dead in an airplane crash in Nepal have yet to hear from the government or the airline on the possible cause of the disaster, they said a day after the small jet went down during take-off at the airport in Kathmandu, the capital.

The incident has cast a spotlight on the mountainous, landlocked nation's poor record on air safety, with almost 360 people killed since 2000 in plane and helicopter crashes.

The 50-seater CRJ-200 aircraft that crashed this week was operated by Saurya Airlines, and was ferrying 15 technicians, two crew and two of a technician's family to the central city of Pokhara, where it was scheduled for regular maintenance.

Only the captain survived after it crashed in a field beside the runway and caught fire.

"Nobody has contacted us," said Krishna Bahadur Magar, a relative of Nava Raj Ale who was a ground handler at Saurya and died in the crash.

"Our relative was a member of the Saurya Airlines family," Magar said. "Why is the airline now behaving as if they don't care about him?"

Magar was among the dozens who crowded into a narrow alley outside the forensic unit of Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital on Thursday, waiting for authorities to release the bodies of the dead.

Some said doctors had told them they would not receive the remains of loved ones before Saturday, while those bodies charred beyond recognition would require DNA tests to be identified, a process that could take two weeks.

The victims' families felt as if Saurya officials were "deliberately hiding" from them, said Jageswar Giri, whose brother-in-law, Uddhab Puri, died in the crash.

"We want to know what technical problems the aircraft was facing, why so many people were on it yesterday, and why it was decided that maintenance work would be done in Pokhara instead of Kathmandu where the plane was grounded," he said.

Officials from the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) have said the plane was being sent to Pokhara because its new airport was equipped with aircraft maintenance hangars.

Responding to the families' questions, the regulator said it was the airline's responsibility to co-ordinate with them.

"It was not a passenger flight," said CAAN spokesperson Gyanendra Bhul. "Saurya Airlines has officially said all people on board the plane were their staff, so they should co-ordinate with the family members."

The airline did not respond to telephone calls and messages from Reuters seeking comment.

A government panel set up on Wednesday to investigate the crash will

submit a report within 45 days.

Nepal's worst crash in 1992 killed 167. Last January, 72 people died when a Yeti Airlines plane crashed just before landing in Pokhara.

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