

## BRISTOW HELICOPTER 5N-BGD CRASH

## AIB probes crash of chopper in Lagos

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WITH the two remaining bodies now found, the Accident Investigation Bureau (AIB) has commenced full investigations into the cause of Wednesday's crash of the Lagos Airport-bound Bristow helicopter.

The twin-engine Sikorsky, operated by the United States (U.S.)-based Bristow Group, was coming from Escravos oilrig in Delta State but crashed behind the King's Palace at Oworonsoki, Lagos, and exploded.

Senior Investigator, AIB Air Safety, Clement Onyeyiri, however, debunked that claim that the accident was caused by technical fault, saying it was too hasty to say that.

Aviation agencies, particularly the AIB and the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA), investigating the crash said they are delaying the release of the aircraft manifest because the airline has not reported that it has contacted families of the victims.

At separate briefings, the two agencies said the standard practice in aviation worldwide, 'is that when an accident occurs, the families of the victims must first be contacted by the airline operator before disclosing the manifest.'

Speaking to journalists in Lagos yesterday, AIB Commissioner, Dr. Felix Abali, said even though his Bureau has a copy of the manifest, it was not in its place to disclose it, until the airline chooses to do so.

He, however, announced that AIB had commenced investigation into the accident, saying that the main part of the plane has been pulled out without the black boxes. According to him, the search for the data recorders would continue today.

Asked when the Bureau would release the preliminary report of the accident, Abali said it was working very hard to release it 'soon.'

According to him, a thorough job must be done before coming up with a report because 'you do not speculate in aviation; reports must be accurate to the event.'

In his own briefing, DG NCAA, Capt. Muhtar Usman, said accidents are not the same and are, therefore, treated differently.

He described the manifest as part of the investigation and that the airline operator must contact the families of the victims before it would be released.

When *The Guardian* contacted the airline to know whether the families of the victims have been contacted, its spokesperson, Cornelius Onuoha, said the airline was making frantic efforts to reach out to them.

General Manager of the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA), Michael Akindele, who confirmed the recovery of the remaining two bodies, declared the rescue operation over.

"As at last night, we had six survivors and four fatalities. As we speak, we have recovered two more bodies, as claimed that there were 12 on board," he explained. "However, we are still expecting officially the manifest of the flight to confirm the identities of those on board."

"I must commend the local divers, the marine police and LASMA for a wonderful job done, even the merchant navy. All hands were on deck. Like I directed, they will be taken to the Mainland General Hospital mortuary to be added to the four previously there for further investigations."

Also, the Southwest Zonal Coordinator of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Dr. Bandle Onimode, confirmed the conclusion of rescue operations with the recovery of the two bodies even as commended the efforts of local divers, who rose up to the occasion.

"The local divers, the Nigerian Police (marine section), and the navy merchant were here; they worked with us and the Lagos Waterways Authority in the recovery of these



NEMA officials conducting resuscitation exercise on the survivors

- Why plane's manifest is delayed, by NCAA, others
- Black boxes, data recorders yet to be recovered
- Firm to assist survivors, deceased families

two bodies.

"Search and rescue is not a time-bound operation because this is water, we are still following. But I can tell you the recovery exercise is over. That is first phase. The second phase, which should be anchored by the Accident Investigation Bureau, will commence immediately, and as soon as everything has been put in motion, they will be given the necessary assistance. "Rescue agencies were here on time and they did their best. Those taken to hospital are stable and doing well."

Meanwhile, two of the survivors taken to Afolabi Medical Centre at Oworonsoki have been relocated to a hospital belonging to the oil service firm at Victoria Island. The medical director, Dr. Olajide Afolabi, told *The Guardian* that they were in stable condition before their relocation at about 11p.m on Wednesday.

The other four at Gbagada General Hospital, *The Guardian* learnt, were also taken along. Afolabi, who could not immediately give the name of the oil-servicing firm, said there was no need to take them abroad for further medical attention. **Aviation Ministry expresses regrets** Nevertheless, the Aviation Ministry has described the incident as shocking, with the Permanent Secretary, Binta Bello, regretting that such accident occurred in the first place. She told journalists at the scene of the crash yesterday: "Our heartfelt regrets at the accident itself."

"It's sad that such a thing took place. Just as I was coming to Lagos I read in the newspaper that a United States military helicopter had an accident just yesterday, so these things are natural occurrences."

"I want to appreciate all the efforts of the rescue teams that responded promptly to the call, especially the community divers that really worked very hard in collaboration with our rescue team."

"We have to wait for the outcome of the investigation to see what actually happened, what was the main cause of the accident, otherwise the regulatory agencies are doing their work. We have to wait patiently for the result of the investigation to determine the way forward."

#### Local drivers as heroes

For a local diver, Adedayo Hassan, the rescue operation was not an easy task as he even had a cut on his leg. He said: "We stressed ourselves there. Yesterday we were in the lagoon. When the incident happened, I rushed there for rescue."

"The helicopter was smoking and spinning before it crashed into the water. We were the first to get there and were able to rescue six persons yesterday. We went back and found four dead."

However, we discovered that there were two left in the helicopter, so we went there this morning to bring them out. We had to cut the belts and some ropes. They were in the front seat; we had to broke the glass."

Leader of the divers in Oworonsoki, Haruna Ishola, also known as *King of Boys*, corroborated Hassan's account, adding that his men went with some sand dredgers there.

"We had picked two alive, then another four, then four dead bodies. Yesterday night, we were told the passengers were 12, so we went back this morning and recovered the remaining two."

#### The fortunate survivors

Survivors of the crash have been disclosed as Solomon Ude, Joshua Emekema, Chukwudi Onah, Dolu Epiejura, Ononode Ojeite and Iniala Opaimi.

Meanwhile, the family of the American captain, Joseph Wyatt, has declared him missing following the crash, fueling speculation that he might have died. The family,

in a tweet, sought information on the pilot, saying that little was being given the family. *The Guardian* could not yet contact the survivors as at press time.

Meanwhile, before the Lagos accident, the model had been involved in just two crashes (in 2002 and 2005) with multiple fatalities since the turn of the century.

Sikorsky says its S-76 range has built an "outstanding and enviable" record for safety and reliability in over 30 years of improvement and six million hours in flight.

There had been several military helicopter accidents across Nigeria in recent years, but air crashes involving private choppers have been relatively rare.

#### Bristow Helicopter to assist survivors, families

On their part, Bristow Helicopters Limited yesterday promised to assist the survivors and families of the dead victims of its ill-fated chopper, according to the *News Agency of Nigeria (NAN)*.

In a statement, the Regional Director for Africa, Duncan Moore, noted: "Our thoughts are with those affected by the unfortunate accident. We regret the loss of lives in the air crash and are ready to assist them with our full resources."

"Our highest priority is to take care of our crew and clients and their family members and provide them with any assistance needed. Our personnel are currently working to confirm the number of people on board, their identities and the extent of any injury."

According to Moore, "the company is fully cooperating with the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority, the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria, the Accident Investigation Bureau and the Nigeria Police. Preliminary information indicates that the aircraft had 10 passengers and a crew of two, subject to confirmation."

"The company is in the process of collecting pertinent information and we will release more details as soon as it is available. At this time, the full resources of Bristow Helicopter's incident response team are being mobilised."