

FEATURED

Abuja plane crash: Residents recount near-death experience

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Scene of the NAF jet crash

Our Reporters

The tranquility that characterises Nassau Village in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, was on Sunday disturbed when a jet belonging to the Nigerian Air Force crash landed in the area.

Noise from aircraft is not strange to residents of the village, being one of the settlements that bordered the Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport.

But the Sunday experience was not only strange, it was a near-death experience for them.

It started with a loud and unusual noise from the ill-fated aircraft, followed by a loud explosion and then billows of thick smoke and fire.

By the time it all subsided, seven souls have been lost.

The jet en route Minna in Niger State crashed close to the runway of the Abuja airport after reporting engine failure.

The plane was said to be on its way to Minna to rescue 27 students and 15 staff of Government Science College, Kagara, who were kidnapped on Wednesday.

As of the time our correspondents arrived the scene of the accident which was said to have occurred at about 11am, distraught residents who were watching rescue operations from a safe distance were telling stories of how it happened and how they were saved by luck.

We thought it was a bomb blast –Residents

One of the residents, who witnessed the accident, Ebube Onyedi, told our correspondents that they initially took the loud sound that characterised the crash for a bomb blast

“The accident happened around some minutes to 11am this (Sunday) morning and it caused confusion in Nassau, which as you can see is one of the communities bordering the Abuja airport.

“Many of us ran out of our houses when we heard the explosion. It really caused so much panic, as initially, people thought it was a bomb blast,” he struggled to say while still catching his breath.

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Casualty figure would have been more

Another resident, who simply identified himself as Gboyega, said he saw the aircraft struggling to land but it eventually crashed and burst into flames.

Gboyega applauded the pilot of the aircraft, as he stated that the pilot averted what would have turned out to be “a greater casualty figure.”

He said, “The pilot tried not to crash the plane on buildings because it was almost falling on some structures before it eventually dropped where there was no building.

“It burst into flames after crashing and people in their respective homes around the area ran out in fear.

“If not for the pilot’s efforts, we would have seen a greater casualty figure.”



Bodies were burnt beyond recognition – Toyheeb

Another resident of the area, Sunkonmi Toyheeb, said he was working in a building in the community when the aircraft crashed.

“We were among the first set of people who rushed to the accident scene because I was working in a building close to the areas where the aircraft fell.

“The fire service men tried, well may be because this place is close to the airport. But before they could put out the fire, the people inside the plane have been burnt beyond recognition.”

Responders couldn’t save victims – Nnaemeka

Another eyewitness, Ruth Nnaemeka, said the sight of the crash had continued to make her shiver.

She noted that although responders from the airport rushed to the scene in good time, they could not save the occupants of the aircraft from being burnt.

She said, “I saw the plane before it crashed. At first, it hovered as if it wanted to land and before you know what was happening, it moved up again into the sky.

“It then kept swinging from one side to the other. In fact, the sight was terrible. It tried moving towards the airport where other airplanes use to land.

“From afar, I saw it going down and at a point it disappeared and the next thing that followed was a bang which led to the eruption of fire and thick smoke.

“And I was like, ‘Oh God, these are humans burning in this fire.’ The situation got me scared and worried and I couldn’t eat after seeing what happened to that plane this morning.

“Fire service men and ambulances rushed down as early as they could because this place is close to the airport, but they could not save the passengers from being burnt because the explosion was huge.”

Officials of the Ministry of Aviation said the NAF jet crashed after it had reported an engine failure at about 10.39am.

They said firefighters from the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria and the National Emergency Management Agency were among first responders to the crash site.

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“A Nigerian Air Force NAF201 B350 aircraft departed Abuja at 1033UTC with six persons on board including two crew,” the Director, Public Affairs, FMA, James Oduadu, stated in a brief update about the accident.

He added, “Aircraft reported engine failure at time 1039 and crash landed on the final approach path of Abuja Runway 22 at time 1048UTC.

“Fire services are already at the scene of the accident. All six persons on board reported dead.”

The incident was also confirmed by the Minister of Aviation, Hadi Sirika, who identified the aircraft as King Air 350.

He said via his official Twitter handle that “A military aircraft King Air 350 has just crashed short of our Abuja runway after reporting engine failure enroute Minna.

“It appears to be fatal. We should remain calm and wait for the outcome of investigation by the military, while we pray for the departed soul souls.”

The General Manager, Public Affairs, FAAN, Henrietta Yakubu, told one of our correspondents that the authority had to respond by sending its fire fighters to the accident scene.

She, however, stated that the accident would be investigated and further updates provided by the NAF as the aircraft involved was not a commercial jet.

Also, the spokesperson, Accident Investigation Bureau, Tunji Oketunbi, said the accident involved a military aircraft and the AIB would not investigate such situation based on its mandates.

He, however, noted that the AIB would only investigate the matter when called upon by the military to be involved in the investigations.

We recovered seven bodies from plane crash site – FERMA

The Federal Capital Territory Emergency Management Agency said it recovered seven bodies from the crash site.

The FERMA Director-General, Alhaji Abass Idriss, said the remains of the aircraft passengers had been deposited at the Nigeria Air Force morgue.

Speaking to *The PUNCH* on the phone on Sunday, Idriss denied reports that some persons were killed on the ground by the aircraft, noting that only the seven passengers on the plane died.

He said, “We recovered seven bodies from the crash site and the remains have been taken to the NAF morgue. The NAF has the manifest and they know all those on board. The plane did not crash into any building or individuals on the ground, so all the people on board have been accounted for.”

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The Nigeria Air Force Director of Public Relations and Information, Air Commodore Ibikunle Daramola, said the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice Marshal I. Amao, had ordered an immediate probe of the accident.

Daramola said, “This is to confirm that a Nigerian Air Force Beechcraft KingAir B350i aircraft crashed while returning to the Abuja Airport after reporting engine failure enroute Minna. First responders are at the scene. Sadly, all seven personnel on board died in the crash.

“The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice Marshal IO Amao, has ordered an immediate investigation into the incident.

“While urging the general public to remain calm and await the outcome of investigation, the CAS, on behalf of all NAF personnel, commiserates with the families of the deceased.”

Female victim alive but burnt –Witness

An eyewitness who have her name as Vivian Idoba, revealed that a female passenger on the ill-fated military aircraft was still alive when she (Idoba) got to the scene.

She, however, noted that the victim’s lower parts were totally burnt, adding that she gave up the ghost shortly after.

Idoba explained that four persons were successfully brought out of the smoking wreckage of the aircraft by first responders, noting that the unidentified female victim was still breathing then.

She stated, “The woman was breathing when she was brought out of the crashed plane alongside four others. Her legs were totally burnt by fire but the upper part of her body wasn’t really affected by the fire. She eventually gave up the ghost shortly after.”

A resident of Basa community, Andrew Odeh said the plane was flying very low shortly before it crashed.

The businessman said he knew the aircraft was having problems the way it flew very low over the buildings in the area.

He noted, “I was standing outside when I observed the plane flying very low. Instinctively, I knew it was having problems because it was flying as if it would drop from the sky any moment.

“I was still wondering what the issue was when it disappeared from sight. I heard a loud crash and we all ran towards the crash site but we couldn’t go close on account of the huge fire and smoke. It was terrible.”

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Pilot complained of engine failure minutes before Abuja crash

The pilot of the ill-fated aircraft complained of engine failure barely moments after takeoff.

A source at the control tower revealed this to The PUNCH on the strict condition of anonymity.

The official said there been regular flights from Abuja to Minna since the abduction of the Kangara students last week.

The source said, “The aircraft was on its way to Minna. Moments after, on getting to Bassa Local Government area, he informed the control tower that he had experienced an engine failure.

“He was advised to return to the Abuja airport immediately but it crash-landed.”

When asked if the identities of those on board had been ascertained, the official said they were in the process of doing so.

“There have been frequent flights to Niger State since the abduction of the schoolkids. Last week some ministers also flew. Soon, we will know their identities,” he said.

Buhari mourns victims, restates regime’s commitment to safety of airspace

The President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.), on Sunday mourned victims of the military aircraft that crashed in Abuja earlier in the day.

Buhari’s condolence was contained in a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Femi Adesina, titled “President Buhari sends condolences to NAF, families of victims of military plane crash.”

The statement read, “President Muhammadu Buhari is deeply saddened by the fatal crash of Nigerian Air Force (NAF) Beechcraft KingAir B350i aircraft on Sunday in Abuja that claimed the lives of seven personnel.

“On behalf of the Federal Government, President Buhari extends heartfelt condolences to family members, friends and colleagues of those who died as a result of this tragedy.

“The President joins the Nigerian Air Force, the military and other Nigerians in mourning the unfortunate loss of the dedicated and courageous personnel, who died in the line of duty.

“President Buhari notes that while investigations into the cause of the crash are ongoing, the safety of the Nigerian airspace remains a key priority of the government.

“He prays that God will comfort the bereaved families and nation, and grant the souls of the departed peaceful rest.”

VIDEO: Nigerian military plane crashes near Abuja Airport

Senate President condoles with NAF, families of victims

The President of the Senate, Ahmad Lawan, has expressed his shock and sadness over the tragic news of the crash.

Lawan in a statement by his media adviser, Ola Awoniyi, condoled the families of those killed in the accident and prays that Allah would comfort them in this time of grief.

He also commiserated with the Nigerian Air Force and charged the authorities to reinforce their safety measures against future occurrence.

NAF officers on mission to rescue Kagara abductees – Reps

The House of Representatives Committee on Air Force also commiserated with the Nigerian Air Force and families of the victims.

The Chairman of the committee, Shehu Koko, said, “We highly regret the loss of our gallant officers who apparently were on a mission to rescue the kidnapped students in Kagara community in Niger State.”

Koko on Sunday and titled ‘House Committee on Air Force commiserates with Nigerian Air force, family of victims,’ said he witnessed the incident along with the Chief of Air staff, Air Vice Marshal Isiaka O. Amao.

NAF releases names of crash victims

The Nigerian Air Force has released the names of the victims of the Beechcraft KingAir B350i which crashed while returning to the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, after reporting engine failure enroute Minna, on Sunday.

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The names were released after the NAF had informed the families of the deceased.

The NAF spokesman, Air Vice Marshal Ibikunle Daramola in a statement said the victims include the Captain, Fl Lt. Haruna Gadzama; Fl. Lt. Henry Piyo (Co-Pilot); Flying Officer Micheal Okpara (Airborne Tactical Observation System Specialist); Warrant Officer Bassey Etim (ATOS Specialist); Fl. Sgt. Olasunkanmi Olawunmi (ATOS Specialist); Sgt. Ugochukwu Oluka (ATOS Specialist) and Aircraftman Adewale Johnson (Onboard Technician).

The statement said, “As earlier stated, the Chief of the Air Staff Air Vice Marshal Oladayo Amao, has instituted an investigative panel to determine the remote and immediate causes of the accident.

“While the panel has commenced its work, the NAF, having notified the Next- of- Kins/family members of the deceased, regretfully announces that the names of the seven personnel who lost their lives in the crash.”

It explained that the CAS visited the scene of the accident in company of the Minister of Defence, Maj. Gen. Bashir Magashi (retd.); Minister of Aviation, Senator Hadi Sirika; Chief of Defence Staff, Maj. Gen. Lucky Irabor, and other Service Chiefs.

“The CAS, on behalf of officers, airmen and airwomen of the NAF, once more commiserates with the families of the deceased personnel and prays that the Almighty God grants their souls eternal repose,” the statement added.

By Olalekan Adetayo, Eniola Akinkuotu, Sunday Aborisade, Adelani Adepegba, Leke Baiyewu and Nnodim Okechukwu

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