All but two feared dead after South Korea plane crashes with 181 aboard

AFP- A Jeju Air plane carrying 181 people from Thailand to South Korea crashed on arrival Sunday, smashing into a barrier and bursting into flames, leaving all but two feared dead.

A bird strike and adverse weather conditions were cited by authorities as likely causes of the crash that flung passengers out of the plane and left it “almost completely destroyed”, according to fire officials.

Video showed the Jeju Air plane from Bangkok landing on its belly at Muan International Airport, skidding off the runway as smoke streamed out from the engines, before crashing into a wall and exploding in flames.



“Passengers were ejected from the aircraft after it collided with the wall, leaving little chance of survival,” a local fire official told families at a briefing, according to a

statement released by the fire brigade.

“The plane is almost completely destroyed, and identifying the deceased is proving difficult. The process is taking time as we locate and recover the remains,” he was quoted as saying.

Only two people were rescued, both flight attendants, and 167 people were confirmed dead by early evening, the fire department said in a statement.

An AFP photographer saw the burned-out wreckage of the Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 aircraft on the runway at Muan – some 288 kilometres (about 180 miles) southwest of Seoul – as firefighters and emergency vehicles worked nearby.

Bits of plane seats and luggage were strewn across the field next to the runway, not far from the charred tail, offering a glimpse into the catastrophic impact of the crash.

– ‘Mayday’ –

Inside the airport terminal, tearful family members gathered to wait for news, with the boards typically used for arrival and departure information displaying names, dates of birth and nationalities of the victims.

The accident took place in a matter of minutes from 9:03 am (0003 GMT) on Sunday during the landing of Jeju Air Flight 2216, the Ministry of Land said, with 175 passengers, including two Thai nationals, and six crew onboard.

“It took approximately three minutes from the control tower’s mention of a bird strike warning to the aircraft’s attempt to land on the runway again,” it said.

Two minutes before the crash, the pilot issued a Mayday call, it added.

When asked if the accident happened due to the runway being too short – video shows the plane coming off the tarmac and

hitting a wall – the official said this was likely not a factor.

“The runway is 2,800 metres long, and similar-sized aircraft have been operating on it without issues,” they said.

“It is unlikely that the accident was caused by the length of the runway.”

Lee Jeong-hyun, chief of Muan fire station, said during a briefing that the cause was “presumed to be a bird strike combined with adverse weather conditions.”

“However, the exact cause will be announced following a joint investigation,” Lee said.

Low-cost carrier Jeju Air apologised and vowed to do all it could to help.

“We sincerely apologise for causing concern,” the airline said in a statement posted on its social media channels.

Boeing said in a statement that it was in touch with Jeju Air and stood “ready to support them”.

– Engulfed in flames –

South Korea’s acting President Choi Sang-mok, who only took office Friday, convened an emergency meeting with cabinet members to discuss rescue operations and response before heading to Muan, his office said.

“I believe no words of consolation would suffice for the bereaved families who have suffered this tragedy,” said Choi.

“The entire government is working closely together to manage the aftermath of the accident, dedicating all available resources, while making every effort to ensure thorough support for the bereaved families,” he added.

It is the first fatal accident in the history of Jeju Air, one

of South Korea’s largest low-cost carriers, which was set up in 2005.

On August 12, 2007, a Bombardier Q400 operated by Jeju Air carrying 74 passengers came off the runway due to strong winds at the southern Busan-Gimhae airport, resulting in a dozen injuries.

South Korea’s aviation industry has a solid track record for safety, experts say.

A number of fatal aviation accidents have occurred globally due to bird strikes, which can cause a loss of power if the animals are sucked into the air intakes.

In 2009, a US Airways Airbus A320 famously landed in New York’s Hudson River after bird strikes on both of its engines, in an incident widely known as the “Miracle on the Hudson” because there was no loss of life.

AFP