Plane with 181 on board crashes in South Korea, killing 85

AFP- A Jeju Air plane carrying 181 people from Bangkok to South Korea crashed on arrival Sunday, killing at least 85, emergency services said, with a bird strike and adverse weather conditions cited as likely causes.

Two survivors – one crew and one passenger – were plucked from the wreckage as part of an ongoing rescue operation, the national fire agency said in a statement.

Video shared by the local MBC broadcaster showed the Jeju Air plane landing at Muan International Airport's runway, with smoke streaming out from the engines, before the entire aircraft was quickly engulfed in flames.

"The cause of the accident is presumed to be a bird strike combined with adverse weather conditions. However, the exact cause will be announced following a joint investigation," Lee Jeong-hyun, chief of Muan fire station, said during a briefing.

In its latest update of the rescue operation, the National Fire Agency said: "So far, two rescued and 85 dead."

Lee Hyeon-ji, a response team officer at the local fire department, had earlier warned that "the tally could rise due to the critically injured".

Rescue authorities were evacuating passengers from the rear section of the jet, Lee said.

A photo showed the tail section of the plane – a Boeing 737-8AS according to Flight Radar – engulfed in flames on what appeared to be the side of the runway, with firefighters and

emergency vehicles nearby.

The Muan International Airport is in Muan county, which is about 288 kilometres (179 miles) southwest of Seoul.

The fire agency said it had mobilised 32 fire engines and scores of fire fighters to the scene.

The accident took place at 9:03 am (0003 GMT) on Sunday during the landing of Jeju Air Flight 2216, the Ministry of Land said.

“A total of 175 passengers — including two Thai nationals — and six crew members were onboard,” it said.

The initial fire was extinguished and a search and rescue operations was “under way at the crash site”, it said in a statement at around 11:00 am local.

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

“We at Jeju Air will do everything in our power in response to this accident. We sincerely apologise for causing concern,” the airline said in a statement posted on its social media channels.

— Engulfed in flames —

Acting President Choi Sang-mok called for the mobilisation of all resources to save the passengers.

“All related agencies… must mobilise all available resources to save the personnel,” he instructed officials in a statement.

Choi convened an emergency meeting with cabinet members to discuss rescue operations and response, his office said, adding that the acting president, who took office only on Friday, is on his way to Muan.

“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.

Last year, a passenger opened an emergency exit on an Asiana Airlines flight as it was preparing to land, with the aircraft landing safely but several people hospitalised.

AFP