

Ukrainian jet was on fire before crash: Report

Agencies

Tehran: A Ukrainian airliner was on fire immediately before it crashed southwest of Tehran, killing all 176 on board, according to an initial report by Iranian investigators.

The Ukrainian International Airlines Boeing 737-800, flying to Kiev and carrying mostly Iranians and Iranian-Canadians, crashed shortly after taking off on Wednesday from Tehran's Imam Khomeini airport.

The report, by Iran's civil aviation organization, cited witnesses on the ground and in a pass-

Reuters there was evidence one of the jet's engines overheated.

The crash occurred hours after Iran launched missile attacks on U.S.-led forces in Iraq, leading some to speculate that the plane may have been hit.

Five security sources - three Americans, one European and the Canadian - who asked not to be named, told Reuters the initial assessment of Western intelligence agencies was that the plane had suffered a technical malfunction and had not been brought down by a missile.

In Kiev, Ukraine's President



ing aircraft flying at high altitude as saying the jet was on fire while still aloft.

The three-year-old Boeing jet, which had its last scheduled maintenance on Jan. 6, encountered a technical problem shortly after take-off and started to head toward a nearby airport before it crashed, the report said.

The technical problem was not specified in the report. However, a Canadian security source told

Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the government was considering several possible causes of the plane crash.

In a television statement Zelenskyy asked people to refrain from speculation, conspiracy theories and hasty evaluations regarding the crash. He also declared Jan. 9 a day of national mourning.

He said that he would speak by telephone with the Iranian president to step up cooperation into the reason for the crash.

4 Turkish Soldiers Killed In Car Bombing In Syria

Agencies

ANKARA: Four Turkish soldiers were killed Wednesday in a car bombing in northeast-



ern Syria, Turkey's defense ministry said.

The soldiers were conducting road patrols when the attack happened in the region captured by Turkish forces after the latest operation against a Kurdish militia last year.

The ministry did not provide further information on exactly where the bomb exploded or who was to blame for the attack.

Turkish soldiers support-

ing Syrian proxies launched an offensive against the US-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in October 2019.

Ankara says the YPG is a "terrorist" offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984.

The PKK is blacklisted as a terror group by Turkey and its Western allies.

Turkey previously launched two military operations in northern Syria against the Daesh extremist group in 2016 and the YPG in 2018.



Zarif Prior to Iranian Strike: 'Beautiful Military Equipment Doesn't Rule World - People Do'

Agencies

Tehran: Ahead of Wednesday's retaliatory strike in response to the US killing of General Soleimani, Javad Zarif spoke to an American edition unambiguously stating that Washington cannot stay in the region any longer after yielding few results, if any, and only infuriating the locals.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has posted a link to his sit-down interview with CNN on the sidelines of the Tehran Dialogue Forum 2020 (TDF2020), in which he explicitly described the US role and reputation in the Middle East. "Donald Trump has to realise that the US has been fed misinformation", Zarif stated.

He explained to what extent the Iranians and other people in the region do not want the US there, contending that "beautiful military equipment that you spent 2 trillion dollars on do not [sic] rule the world, but people do". "And people of our region want the US out", he unambiguously remarked, noting that people are enraged.

Responding to a reporter's question, Zarif mentioned that it makes no sense to speak to President Trump about this as he "has

to realise" how things are in the region, wake up to reality, apologise "and change course" as it has so far "been making it worse" even for America. "Is the United States more secure today because of that [after spending 7 trillion dollars in the region]?"

Separately, Iranian diplomat Zarif branded US President Donald Trump's decision to order a drone strike that killed the country's top military commander an act of "state terrorism", vowing a proportionate response, as a "disproportionate one is a war crime".

"We will respond lawfully, we are not lawless people like President Trump", Zarif remarked, apparently referring to a tweet Trump sent Saturday in which POTUS said that if Iran strikes any Americans or American assets, the United States has 52 Iranian sites targeted - a reference to the number of Americans taken hostage in the 1979 revolution - "some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture", he wrote.

Zarif hit back, arguing that such comments signal that Trump "has no respect for international law and is prepared to commit war crimes - attacking cultural sites is a war crime".

Shortly after the comments, in the early hours of Wednesday, Iran retaliated for Quds General Qasem Soleimani's death with fire, launching rockets at two US airbases in Iraq. POTUS later commented that the US forces stationed there were not in any way harmed, basing the US killing of Soleimani on allegedly obtained data that the general was preparing attacks on American personnel in Iraq in the near future.

He also bragged about the US Armed Forces "big and accurate" missiles and boasted about their achievements during his tenure.

He praised "new powerful economic sanctions" against Iran, promising that they would be in place until Iran "changes its behaviour", said that he would ask NATO to be "much more involved" in the situation, and refrained from warning about any military response to Iran's attack on the US bases.

Tensions initially arose after over New Year's Day, Iran-backed Shia Iraqi militias raided entrances to the US Embassy in Baghdad, battering down doors and busting out windows, raising security concerns and prompting Trump to reinforce the US presence in Iraq by 750 soldiers.

House To Vote On Restraining Trump's Actions Against Iran

Agencies

Washington: The House will vote Thursday on a measure limiting President Donald Trump's ability to take military action against Iran as Democratic criticism of the US killing of a top Iranian general intensified.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., announced the planned vote in a one-page statement that said last week's drone strike that killed Gen. Qasem Soleimani was "provocative and disproportionate."

The Democratic war pow-

ers resolution seems certain to pass over solid Republican opposition. A similar proposal by Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., faces an uphill fight in the GOP-run Senate.

Because of a procedural dispute between the two parties, it was unclear whether Thursday's vote would be a step toward binding Trump's hands on Iran or a symbolic gesture of opposition by Democrats.

Republicans say the proposal - a special type of resolution that does not get the president's signature - does not have the force of law.

Democrats say that under the 1973 War Powers Act, it would be binding if also approved by the Senate. The matter has not been definitively decided by federal courts.

The House vote was scheduled shortly after a briefing on Iran Wednesday by top administration officials that many Democrats criticised as lacking specific justification for the killing. Iran retaliated early Wednesday local time by launching missiles at two military bases in Iraq that house American troops. No casualties were reported.

Iraq Set For Conflict, Even If US And Iran De-Escalate

Agencies

Baghdad: Arch-foes Tehran and Washington may be temporarily calling it even after Iranian missiles targeted US forces in Iraq, but analysts predict violent instability will keep blighting Baghdad.

"Iraq will remain a zone of conflict," said Randa Slim of the Washington based Middle East Institute.

Early on Wednesday, Iran launched 22 ballistic missiles at bases in Iraq hosting American and other foreign troops, in a calibrated response to the killing of a top Iranian general in a US air strike last week.

Iran warned Iraq about the raids shortly before they happened and in their immediate aftermath, foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Tehran had concluded its "proportionate" retaliation.

US President Donald Trump, too, said Iran "appears to be standing down" and even suggested Tehran and Washington could work towards a nuclear deal while cooperating against jihadists.

That hinted at a common desire to contain the fallout, but analysts say it would not be enough to spare Iraq.

"Both sides are so mobilised in Iraq, which has become such symbolic terrain for hitting out at the other," said Erica Gaston of the New America Foundation.

Indeed, US troops and even the embassy in Baghdad had been hit by more than a dozen rocket attacks in recent months, which have killed one Iraqi soldier and an American contractor.

The attacks went unclaimed but the US blamed headline elements of the Hashed al-Shaabi, an Iraqi military network incorporated into the state but linked to Tehran.

The strike that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani outside Baghdad international airport on Friday also killed his top Iraqi aid and Hashed deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.



Australia Bushfire

24 killed, 6 mn ha of land burned

Agencies

Sydney: Australia's raging bushfire crisis, one of the worst in its history, has killed 24 people, burned over six million hectares of land, reduced to ashes hundreds of homes and pushed many species towards extinction, officials said on Thursday.

Authorities on Thursday issued fresh warnings and evacuation orders in the country's southeast as hot and windy conditions threatened to regenerate huge bushfires.

Around 23 fires were still burning in Victoria, according to the state's emergency management commissioner Andrew Crisp.

Premier of Victoria Daniel Andrews on Thursday announced extending state's first-ever state of disaster ahead of "significant fire activity" forecast for the next two days.

"We have forecast conditions of extreme danger, very significant fire activity is likely off the back of a hot day today, a hot day tomorrow and a change not coming through in the east of the state until late afternoon tomorrow and in the northern part of the state not until the evening on Satur-

day," he said. "This means that we have every reason to believe there will be significant fire activity over the next 48 hours and that means it is appropriate that we continue the state of disaster," Andrews said.

There will be messages going out to communities in the fire zone on Thursday and those messages will indicate to people that they are in the fire zone and that if they can leave, they should leave, the Premier of Victoria said, adding that "we will not be able to guarantee their safety".

There was a possibility of another round of dry lightning and a wind change which could trigger fires across the state from Friday.

"This is a really significant challenge for us. We don't underestimate it. We don't lightly extend the state of disaster. We have done it because we believe that it will save lives and that, after all, is the most important thing," Andrews said.

Victoria's emergency management commissioner Crisp said that in the state, 244 homes were lost or damaged and another 400 'significant' structures impacted.

NEWSMAKERS

Twitter suspends Israeli reporter's account after post on US casualties in Iran attack

Twitter has suspended the account of a journalist for Israeli newspaper Haaretz after he reported that hundreds of American soldiers injured in Iran's missile attack on a US air base in western Iraq have been evacuated to a Tel Aviv hospital.

"According to reports received by Haaretz, a US aircraft carrying American soldiers wounded by Iran's missile strike on Ain Asad Air Base, landed in Tel Aviv hours ago. Based on informed sources, 224 soldiers were taken to Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center Hospital," read a post on @KhJacki_E account on Wednesday.

It continued that Ronni Gamzu, CEO of the hospital, had reassured the US Department of Defense that "medical staff will attend the American soldiers as best as they can."

Jack Khoury's post was, however, deleted and the US-based social media platform deactivated the account.

In a statement to The Daily Beast website, Twitter said the account had been "permanently suspended for violating our platform manipulation policy."

Another Twitter account, @KhJacki, claimed to be the real Jack Khoury writing, "A fake account impersonating me was pushing fake news with my name on it."

In the early hours of Wednesday, Iran launched tens of missiles at Ain al-Assad in Iraq's western Anbar Province and another American military base in Kurdistan's regional capital, Erbil, in revenge for the US assassination of prominent commander Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani and his companions.

UK Prince To Step Away From Royals, Seeks Financial Independence

Prince Harry, Queen Elizabeth's grandson, said on Wednesday that he and his wife Meghan planned to step back from their roles as senior members of the United Kingdom's royal family and spend more time in North America.

Harry, sixth in line to the British throne, and Meghan, an American former actress, said they hoped to become financially independent and set up a charity while continuing some royal duties.

"We now plan to balance our time between the United Kingdom and North America, continuing to honour our duty to The Queen, the Commonwealth, and our patronages," the couple said in a statement on Instagram. Buckingham Palace issued a statement saying discussions with Harry and Meghan over their future role were at an early stage.

"We understand their desire to take a different approach, but



these are complicated issues that will take time to work through," the palace said. "Discussions with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are at an early stage."

The couple married in May 2018 in a lavish ceremony in Windsor Castle, west of London, and last year Meghan gave birth to their first child, Archie Harrison

Mountbatten-Windsor, who did not receive a royal title.

Splitting time between the UK and North America "will enable us to raise our son with an appreciation for the royal tradition into which he was born, while also providing our family with the space to focus on the next chapter", Harry and Meghan said.

'Don't bite!' quips Pope Francis as he kisses nun

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis warned a nun not to bite him Wednesday in a joking reference to his run-in with an overly zealous pilgrim last week that saw him slap the woman's hand.

"I'll give you a kiss, but you must stay calm. Don't bite!" he told the enthusiastic nun, who had been shouting "Long live the pope!" as Francis greeted pilgrims before his weekly general audience.

The 83-year old Argentinian then bent to kiss her on the cheek, sparking cheers from fellow worshippers in the crowd.

It was the pope's first walkabout among the faithful since a pilgrim grasped his arm and tugged him towards her on New Year's Eve, prompting him to angrily swat her away in images that went viral on social media.

Francis apologized the next day, saying he too sometimes lost his patience.