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Ethiopian Crash Rescue Efforts Continue; Body Counts Revised

January 26, 2010, 08:14 AM EST

By Massoud A. Derhally

Jan. 26 (Bloomberg) -- A search for survivors from the Ethiopian Airlines Boeing Co. 737 that crashed into the Mediterranean Sea with 90 people on board continues off Beirut today. No one has been found alive.

Search and rescue efforts have continued throughout the night and are ongoing this morning, Lebanese army Brigadier Saleh Haj Suleiman said in a telephone interview. We are trying to ascertain the exact depth of where the body of the plane is so divers can proceed.

Fifteen bodies have been recovered so far, Information Minister Tariq Mitri said in an interview. The figure was revised from 21 because of overlapping counts from rescue teams which include forces from the United Nations, aircraft from France and Britain and a U.S. ship, he said.

Flight ET409 left the city's Rafik Hariri International Airport for Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, at 2:35 a.m. yesterday and lost contact with air traffic control minutes after take off. The search is focused 8 kilometers (5 miles) offshore and water at the crash site is between 50 meters and 100 meters (164-328 feet) deep, Elias Murr, Lebanon's defense minister said yesterday.

They have now brought in equipment that will scan the whole area and they should be able to identify the black box, Mitri said by telephone today. No one can be sure of anything in this respect but the hopes are pretty high.

The Ethiopian carrier which took off in stormy weather was carrying 51 Lebanese and 23 Ethiopians, the airline said on its Web site. The eight crew were all Ethiopian. The plane was also carrying two Britons and one person each from Turkey, France, Russia, Canada, Syria and Iraq, the airline said.

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The Lebanese government put the number of Lebanese citizens at 54, saying some held dual citizenship.

The wife of the French ambassador to Lebanon was among those on the plane, according to Anne-Charlotte Dommartin, a spokeswoman for the French embassy in Beirut.

The pilot of the flight was a career flight professional with over 20 years of experience flying various aircraft over the expanded network of the airline, Ethiopian airlines said in a statement on its Web site.

The aircraft with registration number ET-ANB had its regular maintenance service as recently as Dec. 25, 2009 and was declared safe and fit to fly, it said in the statement.

The crash is the fourth fatal accident involving the new generation of Boeing 737s introduced 12 years ago and Ethiopian Airlines' first since 1988, excluding a fatal hijacking in 1996, according to data compiled by London-based aviation consultant Ascend.

Terrorism is unlikely to have been a factor, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman said yesterday in Beirut.

In principle the weather factor is the cause of the crash, Murr said at a press conference in Beirut yesterday, which had been lashed by heavy rain and high winds in the two days prior to the crash. There is no evidence of foul play.

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