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## Iranian Airliner Crashes in Northwest, Killing 168 (Update5)

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By Ali Sheikholeslami



July 15 (Bloomberg) -- An Iranian airliner crashed in the northwestern province of Qazvin on a flight to Armenia, killing all 168 people on board.

The Russian-made Tupolev Tu-154 "is completely destroyed and bodies are burned and ruined," the state-run Mehr news agency cited provincial Police Chief Masoud Jafarinasab as saying. Iran's [Caspian Airlines](#), the operator, refused to comment on what may have caused the crash before examining the flight data recorders, the Russian Interfax news service said.

The aircraft came down 16 minutes after takeoff from Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport, Reza Jafarzadeh, a spokesman for the country's aviation agency, told Mehr. Flight 7908 was headed for the Armenian capital, Yerevan, he said, declining to give further details.

Iranian aviation has one of the worst safety records, with poor maintenance usually blamed. Iran can't buy spare parts for its ageing fleet of U.S.-built aircraft, purchased before the 1979 Islamic revolution, except on the secondary market. The U.S. has banned most trade with Iran since the revolution. Russia and Iran signed an accord in 2008 for sales of 100 Tupolev Tu-204 and Tu-214 planes over a 10-year period.

Debris was scattered across an area stretching up to 15 kilometers (9 miles), suggesting that the aircraft disintegrated in the air, Mehr reported, without citing anyone. The plane was carrying 153 passengers and 15 crew members, Jafarzadeh told state television in a telephone interview.

Armenians, Georgians

Most of the passengers were Armenians, while some Georgian citizens and other nationalities were also on board, the Associated Press reported, citing an unidentified Caspian Airlines representative in Yerevan.

The plane appeared to have come down about half-way into its climb, said [David Learmount](#), a former U.K. Royal Air Force pilot and air-safety editor at Flight International magazine. The nature of the impact suggested a loss of control rather than a crash-landing, he added. Even if two of the three engines fail, a [Tu-154](#) pilot can attempt to land in a controlled way.

The Tu-154 is a reliable model with a safety record comparable to Boeings of the same generation, such as the 727, said Learmount.

"Its safety record is good but not quite comparable with that of a modern Airbus or Boeing," he said. "The pilot's situational awareness is not up to what a modern cockpit can give you."

'Very Awkward'

Sanctions against Iran mean that Boeing is unable to sell planes to the country's airlines, while Airbus "feels constrained because the U.S. puts pressure on them not to," he said.

While Iran can buy modern planes on the second-hand market, "it's very awkward to operate like

that because you then need service backup and parts.”

It's too early to say whether the model's age or characteristics played any part in the disaster, Learmount stressed. “At this stage we have no way of knowing whether this was a technical problem, a structural problem or a human problem.”

This is the sixth fatal accident to passengers on commercial flights this year, though only the first involving an eastern-built airliner, according to the London- based **Ascend** aviation consultancy. The six incidents have claimed more than 600 lives.

#### Built in 1986

The aircraft that crashed was built in 1986 and delivered new to Ariana Afghan Airlines in 1987. It was leased to Caspian Airlines in 1998, Ascend said. This is the eighth fatal accident, including one act of sabotage, suffered by the Tu-154 worldwide in the last 10 years. The Tu-154 first entered service in 1971, Ascend said.

Members of the Iranian junior judo team were among the passengers. The squad was traveling to a training camp in Armenia ahead of international competitions in Hungary in August, the Iranian Students News Agency reported.

“A fire broke out in one engine, and the pilot attempted an emergency landing,” the deputy head of the Armenian civil aviation organization, Arsen Pogossian, said at a news conference, stressing that his comment was “not an official version” of what occurred, Agence France-Presse reported.

#### Investigate Cause

President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** issued a message of condolence, in which he urged the transportation minister and other officials to investigate the cause immediately, the state- run Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

Sweden, which holds the rotating six-month presidency of the European Union, sent a message of condolence, saying the 27- nation bloc extended its “deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those killed in this terrible incident.”

Today's crash brings the number of people killed in Iranian air disasters to some 1,610, according to the country's aviation safety records cited by Mehr.

In November 2006, a transport plane from Iran's Revolutionary Guards crashed at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport as a result of engine failure, killing all 39 people on board.

#### Previous Crashes

In September 2006, an Iran Airtour Tu-154 caught fire and crashed on landing in the northeastern city of Mashhad, killing about 30 people. In January that year, a military aircraft crashed in the northwest of the country, killing all 13 on board, including the commander of the Revolutionary Guards ground forces.

More than 100 people died in December 2005 when a Lockheed Martin C-130 transport plane crashed in a residential area in the south of Tehran because of a faulty engine.

In February 2003, an Ilyushin belonging to the Revolutionary Guards crashed 35 kilometers southeast of Kerman in central Iran, killing all 276 on board. According to Ascend, that was second deadliest air incident in Iran after the U.S. Navy shot down an Airbus A300 over the Persian Gulf in July 1988, killing 290 people.

“It would certainly help Iran to have access to modern Airbus and Boeing aircraft,” Learmount said. “With each successive generation of airplanes, safety has improved.”

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