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Sundance Crash Was 'Bush Plane' for Rugged Terrain (Update2)

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(Updates with EU comment in ninth paragraph.)

By Andrea Rothman and Pius Lukong

June 22 (Bloomberg) -- The Sundance Resources Ltd. managers who died when their aircraft crashed into dense jungle in the Republic of Congo flew a Spanish-built turboprop "bush plane" used routinely on military and law-enforcement missions.

The C-212, which seats 24 to 26 passengers, has been in production for more than 30 years and is popular because it can handle rugged terrain and needs limited servicing. Spanish manufacturer Construcciones Aeronauticas SA, now part of European Aeronautic, Defence and Space Co., delivered more than 480 planes to 43 countries since the first flight in 1971.

"It's a plane that has an excellent reputation for flying in austere environments, operating in difficult circumstances in places that don't have adequate maintenance procedures," said Richard Aboulafia, vice president of Teal Group, a Fairfax, Virginia-based company that publishes reports on military and civil aircraft around the world.

Six Australian, two British, one American and two French citizens were on the twin turboprop plane that went missing on June 19 on a flight from Cameroon's capital Yaounde to Yangadou in Congo, chartered by Sundance. There's no indication of the cause, with no sign of an explosion or fire, George Jones, a strategic adviser to the company, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. The wreckage was found yesterday.

Small Plane Expertise

The C-212 is the smallest of several military transports built by CASA. Spain began developing compact army planes even before World War II, and the country has retained its expertise in that area to this day. CASA was wrapped into the Airbus Military subsidiary created last year. The unit is also building its A400M large army transport in Spain.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency previously operated C-212s in South America and gave its remaining two in 1994 to the State Department, said DEA spokesman Rusty Payne. A C-212 operated by the agency crashed on August 17, 1994 when it was operating in a remote part of Peru, according to Paul Hayes, safety director at U.K. aviation consultants Ascend Worldwide.

There are more than 300 C-212s in military service around the world, Aboulafia said. The aircraft is among those classed in the industry as STOL, for short take-off and landing, meaning the plane can land on very short runways that are out of bounds for jet-planes.

The aircraft was chartered from Aero Service, a "widely used" Congo company that Sundance hired as recently as March or February, Sundance spokesman David Brook said in an interview.

European Blacklist

Aero Service is banned from flying within the European Union under a blanket restriction by the EU from November 2009 on carriers based in the Republic of Congo, given concerns about the country's regulatory oversight, said Helen Kearns, a transport spokeswoman at the European Commission, the bloc's regulatory arm in Brussels.

The model involved in the Congo accident generally sells for about \$5 million, according to Teal, with the military variant selling for about \$6 million. The plane can fly as high as 26,000 feet, with a maximum operating speed of 195 knots, or 360 kilometers (223 miles) an hour. It can carry 20 troops, with a range of 1,000 nautical miles.

Of the more than 480 C-212s that have been delivered, about 120 planes went to civil operators, with the current operating fleet of commercially used C212s at about 65 worldwide, according to Ascend's Hayes.

The plane that went down in Congo first flew on July 10, 1979, and was acquired 10 days later by Transair Swiss, which leased the plane to other operators before selling it to the current owner in 1992, Ascend records show.

C-212s used on passenger flights have had 12 fatal accidents, killing 104 passengers and 38 crew members in the last 25 years, according to Ascend. The accident involving Sundance directors was the first where passengers have been killed since 1996. Most of the past accidents occurred in Indonesia or South America, Hayes said.

"It's quite a rugged aircraft, so it tends to get used from major airfields to air strip in the hinterlands," he said.

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