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Investigators Find Black Box From India Plane Crash (Update2)

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(Updates with number of fatalities from airline passenger flights starting from fourth paragraph.)

By Vipin Nair

May 25 (Bloomberg) -- Investigators found the digital flight-data recorder from the wreckage of an Air India plane that crashed in south India as authorities continue to probe the nation's deadliest air disaster in 14 years.

The "black box" of the Boeing Co. 737-800 that crashed May 22 in the city of Mangalore was retrieved today, according to a statement from the government's Press Information Bureau. The device is "apparently impacted by the crash" and will be tested for decoding, it said.

The Air India Express aircraft from Dubai overshot Mangalore airport's runway and burst into flames, killing 158 passengers and crew. Eight people survived the crash, the first involving a passenger plane in India in a decade.

The Air India crash was the sixth fatal accident in 2010, according to Paul Hayes, director of safety at London-based aerospace data company Ascend Worldwide. A total of 371 people have died in airline accidents this year.

A team of investigators from the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board will arrive in Mangalore today to assist the probe, India's Director General of Civil Aviation S.N.A. Zaidi said in a phone interview. "It is very difficult" to predict how long the investigation will take, he said.

The fire-damaged cockpit voice recorder was recovered from the hillside crash site on May 23. Analyzing the device may take as long as two weeks, the government said.

New Airlines

The crash was the worst in India since a Saudi Arabian Airlines flight collided with a Kazakhstan Airlines jet in November 1996, killing all 349 on board. In July 2000, a Boeing 737-200 crashed into a residential area while approaching Patna airport in eastern Bihar state.

Since then, new airlines such as Kingfisher Airlines Ltd., SpiceJet Ltd., IndiGo, GoAirlines (India) Pvt. and Paramount Airways Ltd. have taken to India's skies as demand surged in the world's fastest-growing major economy after China.

Domestic air traffic in India jumped to more than 35 million passengers in the year ended in March 2009 from fewer than 15 million six years ago, according to the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, an industry consultant. Seven carriers operate 11 different brands in India, compared with four airlines in 2003, it said.

Other airlines that have had fatal accidents this year include Ethiopian Airlines, whose Boeing 737 crashed off the Lebanese coast Jan. 25, killing 82 passengers and Afriqiyah Airways, whose Airbus A330 went down in Tripoli May 12, causing 92 deaths.

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