

Spain: Relatives of military plane crash victims met with official indifference

By Keith Lee
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Families of Spanish servicemen killed when their plane crashed in May have accused the Aznar government of not taking due precautions when hiring the aircraft. They are petitioning the courts to see if negligence charges can be brought.

The Yakolev-42 plane owned by Ukrainian Mediterranean Airlines (UMA) crashed in Turkey on May 26, killing 62 Spanish soldiers and 12 Ukrainian flight crew. The aircraft had left Kabul where the soldiers, mainly from a regiment of engineers, had completed a four-month tour of duty working with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed in construction and bomb disposal duties in Afghanistan.

It had stopped off at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to pick up more Spanish troops on their way to Zaragoza military base in Spain. Flying over Turkey, the pilot had requested to land in the Black Sea port of Trabzon for refuelling, but two landing attempts were abandoned due to dense fog and high winds. During the third attempt the aircraft veered out of control, crashing near the town of Macka.

Spain's President José María Aznar of the right-wing Popular Party has rejected calls for a full inquiry into the crash. In response the victims' families have formed an association to find out the cause of the accident, establish military and political responsibility for it and secure proper compensation.

They have criticised what they say are irregularities in NATO's chartering process and an "absence of control measures" on the part of the Spanish authorities. Although the jet was chartered by NATO on behalf of the Spanish military, the Spanish government was the last link in a "chain of sub-hirings." The lawyer for the families said that although "fortuitous elements took part," the

accumulation of irregularities turned it into "a flight of highest risk."

Attorney Eudaldo Vendrell, acting for the families, has asked Spain's highest criminal court to open a legal inquiry "to establish whether or not there is liability and who is to be held responsible."

The families have also asked the court to clarify the particulars of the crash because they feel the Spanish government is dragging its feet and is indifferent to their concerns. Association member Curra Ripolles said, "We have been asking the support of the defence ministry for the last four months."

Instead the families have been met with a wall of distortions and misinformation. Recently an unattributed report claimed the pilots had been drinking prior to the crash. But Turkish investigators have dismissed these reports. Umit Cendek, deputy director for civil aviation, claims there was no forensic evidence that the two Ukrainian pilots had consumed alcohol.

Doubts have also been cast on the military's identification of the bodies left by the wreckage. The military has said that it was able to positively identify the bodies through name tags sewn into the uniforms. But these have not been cross-checked with dental records, or DNA samples and no relative has made a visual identification. Relatives say that when they went to the crash site to lay flowers they found personal belongings and military identification tags on the ground. Francisco Cardona's son was reported to be a victim but was in civilian dress. Cardona says he does not know on what grounds the identification was made.

Relatives accuse the defence ministry of imposing psychological pressure during talks with them. Association Chairman Carlos Ripolles said, "We don't want alms, we just want to know the truth. Why does it cause them such a problem that we want the truth?"

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