

Dragonair denies its plane in near miss before crash 83 dead in Phuket resort air disaster

From Correspondents in Bangkok

EIGHTY-THREE people are feared dead after a Thai Airways Boeing-737 crashed into the sea yesterday near the Phuket holiday resort in southern Thailand.

Governor Chalerm Phromlert of Phuket province said Flight 365 crashed at 3.20 pm following a near-miss with a Dragonair jet from Hongkong.

But a Dragonair spokesman last night denied the claim, adding that airline officials had spoken to the captain of their aircraft in Phuket.

"We have been assured that the Dragonair aircraft was not involved in the accident," the spokesman said.

He said the airline would inquire further into the disaster and had "expressed sincere sympathies to Thai Airways".

The director of Phuket airport, Mr Prayoon Thaweesang, said the pilot of the Dragonair flight, which landed safely and reported the disaster, had seen the Thai plane spin and plunge into the sea and was extremely distraught.

"I don't think there will be any survivors. The plane has completely submerged," the director said.

Late last night rescuers had all but given up hope of finding any of the 74 passengers and nine crew members alive.

Seventeen bodies had been recovered and officials in Phuket province, 870 km south of Bangkok, said the fate of the remaining victims was unknown.

None had been identified early today.

According to senior Thai officials, the plane crashed about 13 km from Phuket airport as it and the Dragonair flight were descending for landing. The flights were scheduled within one or two minutes of each other.

Officials claimed the pilot of the Thai Airways jet pulled away from a possible collision at about 1,300 metres and the jet, with its wheels down for landing, then plunged into the sea.

Dragonair operates two flights each week to Phuket,

which is a popular holiday destination for Hongkong residents.

The Dragonair aircraft was scheduled to return to Hongkong at 9 pm but a ground hostess said it had been delayed for 2 1/2 hours "due to technical reasons".

About 25 people were waiting at Kai Tak airport last night for the plane to arrive. Some said airline officials had told them the delay was caused by engine trouble.

Dragonair flight 204 landed at Kai Tak about 11.30 last night - two-and-a-half hours late.

Most passengers said they had heard of the crash but did not know any details.

They said they were told the flight was delayed because there was trouble with the plane's brakes.

At first they were told they would be staying the night in Phuket but were later told the plane would fly back to Hongkong.

The flight's crewmen declined to comment on the crash and said enquiries should be made at the airline's office.

One crewman said: "All Dragonair aircraft are safe."

The Thai Airways plane was preparing for a stopover in Phuket on its way to Bangkok from the southern city of Hatyai, near the Malaysian border, which it had left 50 minutes earlier, officials said.

They said 21 marine police boats along with helicopters and fishing trawlers were dispatched to the scene to search for survivors.

Air Marshal Narong Dithipen, the managing director of Thai Airways, said several life jackets were found floating on the water, indicating that passengers were aware that the plane was about to make an emergency landing.

"Phuket control tower said the Thai aircraft was trying to avoid a collision with a Dragonair flight as it was reducing altitude at 1,000 feet above sea level," Air Marshal Narong said.

Thirty-seven of the passengers were foreigners, including three French, three Japanese, two Americans, one Italian and about 30 ethnic Chinese, mostly from Malaysia. The Thai victims



Thai Airways managing director Mr Narong Dithipen at a press briefing. In front is a model of the crashed jet

included a Buddhist monk and a baby.

Airline official Mr Wilai Oulansattien said the Americans, listed as Mr and Mrs Ward, boarded Flight 365 as standby passengers when two Thai passengers cancelled reservations.

Governor Chalerm said an explosion was heard before the plane sank but Air Marshal Narong said he could not confirm those reports.

The Governor said his reports indicated the force of the explosion scattered debris almost a kilometre from the crash site.

A marine police official said four of the bodies recovered were badly mutilated by the blast.

Phuket police captain Kanika Phakpibun said witnesses told police they saw the twin-engine jet spin into the sea.

The disaster relief centre said rescue boats were con-

tinuing to search the area through the night but helicopters returned to shore when darkness fell.

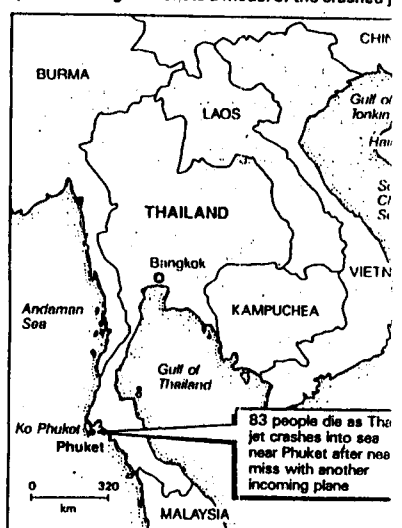
One official said the wreckage was spread over a one-kilometre radius. Most of the wreckage sank 20 minutes after the plane hit the water, said the officer.

A marine police official said one wing of the plane was sticking out of the water and he believed the aircraft was still intact.

It was the third fatal crash of a Thai Airways jet since April 1980.

Eleven people were killed on April 15, 1985, when a Boeing-737, making a special Thai New Year's Day run, crashed into a hill in the southern province of Phang Nga.

On April 27, 1980, 41 people died when a Thai Airways jet crashed just north of Bangkok airport after it was hit by lightning.



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