

HD Britons die in air crash - Pakistan International Airlines Airbus disaster.

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Nepalese disaster claims 167 victims

At least 35 Britons, including a family of five, are believed to have been among 167 passengers and crew who died yesterday when their Pakistan International Airlines Airbus 300 from Karachi to Katmandu smashed into a hill 10 miles south of the Nepalese capital.

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Rescue workers who reached the scene by helicopter said there was no sign of life. "The wreckage of the aircraft is burning and chances of tracing any survivors are remote," said Nagendra Ghimire, deputy chief at Katmandu airport.

The airport is notoriously difficult to approach, being virtually surrounded by high mountains and frequently assailed by storms and blizzards. It has no radar and planes are guided in by radio beacon.

Although some reports said it was raining heavily at the time, Mr Ghimire said there was no apparent explanation for the crash. There were only scattered clouds and moderate winds. "Everything was normal," he said, adding that the pilot had given no indication of any problem. Other airport sources said the aircraft was flying about 1,500 feet below its prescribed altitude.

Agency reports from Nepal, quoting airport sources, said that the PIA Airbus was within minutes of landing when the control tower lost radio contact.

Arrangements were being made last night for a special flight to take family and friends of the victims to Katmandu tomorrow. Officials from the local air accident investigation branch and a crisis team from Airbus Industrie, the European consortium that built the plane, will also fly out.

The crash was Nepal's second air disaster in two months. In July, a Thai Airways Airbus crashed into a mountain north-west of Katmandu airport, killing 113 passengers and crew.

Chauhy Aziz, PIA's sales manager in London, said yesterday that 15 Britons booked through the Bristol travel agency Interactive Adventures and joined the PIA flight after flying from Heathrow to Karachi. Most were thought to be flying out for trekking holidays in the Himalayas.

He said other Britons may have been on the flight from Karachi after booking through three London agencies, **Encounter Overland** Travel, Bridge The World and Quest Worldwide Travel.

Among the British contingent were Andrew and Helen Wilkins, aged 38 and 35, and their three children, Hannah, aged 10, Naomi, aged eight, and Simeon, aged six, who were returning to Nepal where they worked as missionaries for the Christian development group, United Mission.

Two of the victims worked for **Encounter Overland** Travel, based in west London. Melissa Colston, the company's marketing manager, said: "Obviously everyone here is very upset at the news of this tragic

accident. Our two colleagues were flying out on business." Tony Jones, the company's managing director, was preparing to fly out to Katmandu last night.

Three Britons, including a couple, were booked on the PIA flight through Bridge The World, in north London. The couple were on the first stage of a round-the-world "dream ticket," while the third, a woman, was going on a trekking holiday. All three left Heathrow on Sunday bound for Karachi.

"It's just fortunate that it's the beginning of the season and the flight was not completely full. At the end of October, flights are more heavily booked," said Jerry Bridge, managing director of Bridge The World.

Six Britons, including a couple, were booked on the flight through Quest Worldwide Travel, of Kingston upon Thames, south London. Keith Beswick, its managing director, said they were from Wales, Berkshire, Birmingham and Middlesex.

"The six booked their flights through us and then would have gone on trekking holidays independently," he said. "We have not had any official word, but the situation looks bleak."

Other victims were reported to be Sharon Duhig, aged 28, a ski instructor from Middlesex, and her companion Chris Budgett. Sharon's father, Reg, said his daughter was about to fulfil her dream holiday to the Everest base camp. He said: "She was a lovely girl with a bubbly personality. She loved the outdoors and had a sense of adventure. We will miss her very much."

Another victim was named as Deborah Leon, aged 32, a Transport and General Workers' Union official, from Gosforth, Tyne and Wear. She left on Sunday bound for a month-long trekking holiday in the Himalayas.

Most of the 155 passengers were said to be Europeans.

Relatives of Britons believed to have been on the PIA flight should dial 071 270 4112 for information during office hours, or 071 839 1010 at other times.

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