

Plane crash kills 150 in French Alps

Associated Press

SEYNE-LES-ALPES, France — A black box recovered from the scene and pulverized pieces of debris strewn across Alpine mountainsides held clues to what caused a German jetliner to take an unexplained eight-minute dive Tuesday midway through a flight from Spain to Germany, apparently killing all 150 people on board.

The victims included two babies, two opera singers and 16 German high school students and their teachers returning from an exchange trip to Spain. It was the deadliest crash in France in decades.

The Airbus A320 operated by Germanwings, a budget subsidiary of Lufthansa, was less than an hour from landing in Duesseldorf on a flight from Barcelona when it unexpectedly went into a rapid descent. The pilots sent out no distress call and had lost radio contact with their control center, France’s aviation authority said, deepening the mystery.

While investigators searched through debris from Flight 9525 on steep and desolate slopes, families across Europe reeled with shock and grief. Sobbing relatives at both airports were led away by airport workers and crisis counselors.

“The site is a picture of horror. The grief of the families and friends is immeasurable,” German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said after being flown over the crash scene. “We must now stand together. We are united in our great grief.”

It took investigators hours to reach the site, led by mountain guides to the craggy ravine in the southern French Alps, not far from the Italian border and the French Riviera.

Video shot from a helicopter and aired by BFM TV showed rescuers walking in the crevices of a rocky mountainside scattered with plane parts. Photos of the crash site showed white flecks of debris across a mountain and larger airplane body sections with windows. A helicopter crew that landed briefly in the



AP Photo/Claude Paris

Debris of the Germanwings passenger jet is scattered on the mountain side near Seyne les Alpes on Tuesday. The plane carrying at least 150 people crashed Tuesday in a snowy, remote section of the French Alps, sounding like an avalanche as it scattered pulverized debris across the mountain.

area saw no signs of life, French officials said.

“Everything is pulverized. The largest pieces of debris are the size of a small car. No one can access the site from the ground,” Gilbert Sauvan, president of the general council, Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, told The Associated Press.

“This is pretty much the worst thing you can imagine,” said Bodo Klimpel, mayor of the German town of Haltern, rent with sorrow after losing 16 tenth graders and their two teachers.

The White House and the airline chief said there was no sign that terrorism was involved, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged reporters not to speculate on the cause.

“We still don’t know much beyond the bare information on the flight, and there should be no speculation on the cause of the crash,” she said in Berlin. “All that will be investigated thoroughly.”

Lufthansa Vice President Heike Birlenbach told reporters in Barcelona that for now “we say it is an accident.”

In Washington, the White House said American officials were in contact with their French, Spanish and German counterparts. “There is no indication of a nexus to terrorism at this time,” said U.S. National

Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan.

Merkel, French President Francois Hollande and Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy were to visit the site Wednesday.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said a black box had been located at the crash site and “will be immediately investigated.” He did not say whether it was the flight data recorder or the cockpit voice recorder.

The two devices — actually orange boxes designed to survive extreme heat and pressure — should provide investigators with a second-by-second timeline of the plane’s flight.

The voice recorder takes audio feeds from four microphones within the cockpit and records all the conversations between the pilots, air traffic controllers as well as any noises heard in the cockpit. The flight data recorder captures 25 hours’ worth of information on the position and condition of almost every major part in a plane.

Germanwings is low-cost carrier owned by Lufthansa, Germany’s biggest airline, and serves mostly European destinations. Tuesday’s crash was its first involving passenger deaths since it began operating in 2002. The Germanwings logo, normally maroon and yellow, was

blackened out on its Twitter feed.

Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr called it the “blackest day of our company’s 60-year history.” He insisted, however, that flying “remains after this terrible day the safest mode of transport.”

Germanwings said 144 passengers and six crew members were on board. Authorities said 67 Germans were believed among the victims, including the 16 high school students and two opera singers, as well as many Spaniards, two Australians and one person each from the Netherlands, Turkey and Denmark.

The plane left Barcelona Airport at 10:01 a.m. and had reached its cruising height of 38,000 feet when it suddenly went into an eight-minute descent to just over 6,000 feet, Germanwings CEO Thomas Winklermann told reporters in Cologne.

“We cannot say at the moment why our colleague went into the descent, and so quickly, and without previously consulting air traffic control,” said Germanwings’ director of flight operations, Stefan-Kenan Scheib.

At 10:30, the plane lost radio contact with the control center but “never declared a distress alert,” Eric Heraud of the French Civil Aviation Authority told the AP.

BRIEFLY

Obama agrees to slow U.S. pullout from Afghanistan

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama agreed Tuesday to slow the U.S. military pullout from Afghanistan at the request of its new government but insisted the delay won’t jeopardize his commitment to end America’s longest war before leaving office.

In a shift from his previous plan, Obama said the U.S. would leave its 9,800 troops currently in Afghanistan in place rather than downsizing to 5,500 by year’s end. The size of the U.S. footprint for next year is still to be decided, he said, but he brushed aside any speculation the withdrawal will bleed into 2017 when the next president takes over.

“The date for us to have completed our drawdown will not change,” Obama declared.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s inaugural visit to the White House offered a stark contrast to visits by his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, who was viewed by U.S. officials as prickly and unreliable. Ghani went out of his way to thank the U.S. for its sacrifices in his country, offering a window into the efforts by Obama and him to rehabilitate the U.S.-Afghan relationship.

As for the delayed drawdown of U.S. troops, Obama said he and his military leaders believe “that providing this additional time frame during this fighting season for us to be able to help the Afghan security forces succeed is well worth it.”

The U.S. combat role in Afghanistan officially ended late last year, a down payment on Obama’s re-election pledge to wind down the war the U.S. launched in 2001.

Officer charged with killing unarmed driver lying facedown

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — A Pennsylvania police officer was charged Tuesday with criminal homicide after investigators concluded she shot an unarmed motorist in the back as he lay facedown

after a traffic stop over an expired inspection sticker.

Authorities accused Hummelstown police Officer Lisa J. Mearkle of shooting 59-year-old David Kassick twice on Feb. 2 without legal justification. She was released on \$250,000 bail.

Her attorney, Brian Perry, said Mearkle acted in self-defense, and he warned the case could cause police officers to hesitate in high-pressure situations.

“She felt like she had to do what she did,” Perry said. “This person was being commanded, begged, ‘show me your hands,’ and he kept going to his waist.”

Authorities said Mearkle had attempted to pull over Kassick for expired inspection and emissions stickers before he sped away. She caught up to Kassick near his sister’s home where he had been living for a short time.

He got out and ran before Mearkle incapacitated him with a stun gun, held in her left hand. He was on the ground when she shot him twice in the back with the gun in her right hand, police said.

Mearkle, 36, told investigators she fired because he would not show her his hands and she thought he was reaching into his jacket for a gun. Perry said she did not know Kassick before the shooting.

Official: US-led aircraft flying over IS-held Tikrit

TIKRIT, Iraq (AP) — The U.S.-led coalition battling the Islamic State group has begun surveillance flights over the northern Iraqi town of Tikrit, a senior coalition official said Tuesday, marking the first time the alliance has taken part in a major offensive there that is being spearheaded by Iranian-backed Shiite militias.

The official said the flights and intelligence sharing began Saturday and were requested by the Iraqi government. He declined to comment on whether the coalition was carrying out airstrikes. Up to now the offensive to take back Tikrit has been waged by Iraqi troops and Shiite militias.

Common sense, low-cost fix for truck-train crashes rejected by industries

RALEIGH, North Carolina (AP) — America’s railroads want five more years to stop train wrecks using a high-tech system costing more than \$15 billion.

But experts tell The Associated Press that it won’t keep trains and trucks from crashing together unless both industries use a common-sense solution available right away: actually talking with each other before crossing into each other’s territory.

Plenty of fingers have been pointed since an Amtrak train slammed into a massive tractor-trailer in North Carolina this month, injuring 55 people.

No one warned the railroad beforehand that a huge truckload could be in the way.

But as it turns out, no one

had to.

“It is crazy that this doesn’t get coordinated with the railroad, considering how difficult this operation can be and how long it takes to cross it,” Rob Molloy, acting director of highway safety for the National Transportation Safety Board, told the AP on Tuesday.

Unfortunately, no federal law or regulation backed by stiff criminal or civil penalties specifically requires coordination between truck and train operators, the AP found after reviewing state and federal regulations and safety recommendations and interviewing dozens of experts.

About a third of the states, including North Carolina, don’t require it, either.

No one involved has taken any public responsibility for

failing to coordinate the Halifax crossing in advance; not drivers of the truck or its pilot and chase cars, not the trooper escorting the load, not the trucking company, nor the state transportation agency officials who approved the planned route and required that a copy be shared with the State Highway Patrol.

No one in this chain was tasked with making another copy for the railroad, or calling CSX Transportation Inc. dispatchers to warn approaching trains to go slow.

Trucks get in accidents at highway-rail crossings about

10 times a week in the U.S., federal regulators say. Of these, supersized loads can be particularly challenging: An Associated Press review of news coverage found oversized tractor-trailers were hit at least 20 times in 2013 and 2014.

The FRA rules the rails and the Federal Highway Administration runs the roads, but each focuses on its own domain.

In the absence of shared regulations that govern where rails meet roads, highway regulators have issued “best practices” guidelines,

suggesting that pilot car drivers “make advance contact with the railroad if in doubt that the load can safely negotiate the crossing.”

Truck driver John Devin Black seemed to have some doubts before trying to negotiate a left turn across the tracks in Halifax on March 9 with a load that stretched longer than half a football field and weighed 127 tons.

An eyewitness said Black spent 15 to 20 minutes fussing over the load and then moving back and forth in the crossing before the crossing arms came down. He leaped

out moments before impact.

The NTSB has recommended solutions to these rail crossing accidents for 47 years, but can’t make the rules.

And industry groups representing drivers, trucking companies, railroad owners, trains, state troopers and state road and rail agencies don’t want their people held responsible.

During the 47 years since the NTSB began advocating for some form of technology, it could have prevented 144 accidents injuring 6,500 people and killing 300.

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