
BULGARIAN ARMY HELICOPTER CRASHES, KILLING TWO PILOTS

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A Mi-17 military transportation helicopter crashed on Monday evening near Krumovo air force base close to Plovdiv in central Bulgaria, killing both pilots, Captain Plamen Panteleev, 48, and Captain Stoyan Nedelchev, 45.

A third person on board, engineering officer Alexei Kamenov, survived the crash and was severely injured, but managed to crawl out of the wreck.

He is now in a stable condition in hospital, the Ministry of Defence said.

Most probably the cause for the crash was a technical glitch. There is no proof of human error so far, prosecution spokesperson Roumiana Arnaudova told Bulgarian National Television on Tuesday.

This tragedy shows that the modernisation of the Bulgarian army is an urgent matter, Karakachanov added.

Brigade General Dimitar Ivanov, commander of the Krumovo air base, told reporters at a briefing on Monday that said that the helicopter suddenly made a 180-degree turn and nosedived towards the ground. The flight staff were unable to call base to report the problem.

The crash happened around 8.30pm local time during a training flight.

The aircraft was a Soviet-made Mi-17 transportation helicopter, deployed with the Bulgarian army in 1989. It was the last of five similar helicopters at the Krumovo base that was in working order.

This type of helicopter is used for extinguishing forest fires and carries the national flag over Sofia during the annual St Georges Day military parade in May.

Ivanov said that this was the helicopters fourth flight of the day, with none of the other crews reporting any issues after completing their missions.

According to Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, both pilots were very experienced, with 500-600 flight hours each.

Last June, there was another helicopter crash during a Bulgarian navy exercise south of Varna.

The captain of the transport helicopter, Georgi Anastasov, died in the incident, but the co-pilot and the flight engineer survived.

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