SOUTH AFRICAN CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY

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CAA releases interim investigation report on the Plettenberg Bay Pilatus PC-12/47 accident

The South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA) has released a preliminary investigation report on the Plettenberg Bay aircraft accident that took place on 08 February 2011.

In a statement released today, the Authority said that whilst the investigation is still ongoing, the preliminary investigation report has unveiled a few facts; one of them being that the aircraft had departed from Queenstown airport at 15:29 on an instrument flight plan for Plettenberg Bay airport. Regrettably, the aircraft subsequently crashed into the sea approximately 1 000 m off shore, on the western side of the Robberg Nature Reserve. The aircraft, a Pilatus PC-12/47 with registration marks ZS-GAA, had two crew members and seven passengers on board. The aircraft was destroyed during the impact; and unfortunately no one survived the accident.

According to the report, the aircraft was expected to land at the Plettenberg Bay aerodrome at around 16:30. However, it never arrived at its intended destination, nor did the crew cancel their search and rescue notice as per flight plan and air navigation requirements.

During radio contact with Cape Town Area East at 16:27:03 the crew of ZS-GAA had indicated to Air Traffic Control that they would cancel their requisite flight plan search and rescue notice once they had landed. According to the available information, the last communication between the aircraft and Cape Town Area East was at 16:33:03; and by then the requisite flight plan search and rescue notice was still active. Following the last communication with the aircraft, Cape Town Area East tried to establish radio contact with the aircraft several times, but all efforts were in vain and an INCERFA (uncertainty phase) was declared, which was upgraded a short while later directly to a DETRESFA (distress phase).

According to secondary surveillance radar footage, the aircraft disappeared from radar at approximately 16:33:31. No distress call was received by any station from the accident aircraft at any stage of the flight.

An official search for the missing aircraft commenced at around 18:00. The first phase of the search, which was land-based, was conducted in the Robberg Nature Reserve area. Progress was slow due to poor visibility associated with dense mist and dusk. A sea search was not possible at this stage, but vessels from the National Sea Rescue Institute were able to launch at first light the next morning.

Floating debris was picked up from the sea and along the western shoreline of the Robberg Nature Reserve where foot patrols were conducted. On 11 February 2011 the South African Navy joined the search for the missing wreckage by utilising side scan sonar equipment to scan the sea bed for the wreckage. Due to the fact that the aircraft had crashed into the sea, it was essential to recover as much of the debris in the shortest possible time frame. The wreckage was at a substantial depth, which limited dive time, and subsequently made the recovery of wreckage parts a priority.

The investigation has also confirmed that there was no pre- or post-impact fire. The accident was not considered survivable due to the high kinetic energy associated with the impact sequence that was well above that of human tolerance.

There were no eye-witnesses to the crash, which could be attributed to the inclement weather conditions that prevailed in the area at the time. Weather conditions were reported to be overcast with a cloud base of approximately 200 feet above sea level, with dense fog and drizzle at the time.

The aircraft was not equipped with a flight data recorder or a cockpit voice recorder, nor was it required by regulation to be fitted to this type of aircraft.

The investigation team also conducted an analysis of the engine and it was concluded that *'there were no indications of any pre-impact mechanical anomalies or dysfunction to any of the components observed*'.

In addition, the horizontal tail plane of the aircraft was recovered from the sea. It was noted that the right horizontal stabilizer had suffered some impact damage on the leading edge; however the right elevator assembly had remained attached to the stabilizer surface. It was noted that the outer section of the left elevator had failed and was unaccounted for. The horizontal tail plane was inspected by a metallurgist and the left elevator assembly was removed in order to establish the failure mode of the flight control surface. It was then concluded that '*the possibility of failure due to in-flight flutter of the elevator was contemplated. However, the results from this examination and analysis point towards impact rather than flutter-induced failure during operation'*. The full investigation report on the failure mode of the left elevator will be included in the final accident report.

The continuation of the accident investigation will result in the release of the final accident report, which would have taken into consideration all the different factors, possible causes and any recommended safety recommendations. The sole purpose of accident investigations is to establish the causes of aircraft accidents in order to prevent recurrence of accidents emanating from similar causes and as such, not to apportion any blame or establish legal liability.

The report came out two days ahead of the annual Aviation Safety Seminar, which is scheduled for Wednesday, 19 October 2011. The event serves as a platform for all aviation stakeholders to discuss some of the causes and possible solutions towards curbing aviation accidents.

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About the SACAA:
The South African Civil Aviation Authority ("SACAA") is a juristic body established in terms of the Civil Aviation Act, 2009 (Act No. 13 of 2009) ("the Act"). SACAA is governed and controlled by the Civil Aviation Authority Board ("the Board"). In terms of mandate, the SACAA is tasked with promoting and maintaining a safe, secure and sustainable civil aviation environment, by regulating and overseeing the functioning and development of the industry in an efficient, cost-effective, and customer-friendly manner according to international standards.

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