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Cause of plane crash sought

Obstruction on runway and wind cited as possible factors

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Families of Singapore Airlines crash victims flew to Taiwan to retrieve their loved ones' bodies Wednesday as officials worked to figure out what caused the plane to burst into flames during takeoff, killing 79 people — at least 23 of them Americans.

Survivors have said they felt Flight SQ006 hit something as the plane barreled down the runway. But as emergency workers pulled bodies from the charred, blue-and-tan wreckage Wednesday, early speculation also pointed to wind as a possible factor in the Boeing 747-400's accident: At the time of takeoff, the airport was being lashed by the swirling gusts and torrential rains of an approaching typhoon.

Some relatives of those who died have blamed the pilot, Capt. C.K. Foong. On Wednesday, one woman pounded the counter at a Singapore Airlines ticket counter in Taipei and shouted at the company's employees. "How could you take off in this weather?"

But the airline — which had not had a major accident in 28 years of op-

eration — defended Foong's decision. "Conditions were well within safe operational limits," company spokesman Rick Clements told reporters in Singapore. He noted that a flight by Taiwan's China Airlines took off just 15 minutes before Singapore Airlines' takeoff.

"Conditions were well within safe operational limits."

— Rick Clements
Singapore Airlines spokesman

Taiwanese aviation official Billy K.C. Chang said Tuesday night's visibility levels of 1,650-1,980 feet at Chiang Kai-shek International Airport exceeded the minimum requirement of 660 feet needed for takeoff. Measuring safe wind speeds is more complicated, but the gusty winds were not excessive, he said.

In general, control towers wan monitor wind speed and direction, visibility, air traffic and factors before authorizing takeoff, especially during storms such as typhoons. It is then up to the pilots to decide whether to go ahead with takeoff or to abort it if unexpected problems develop on the runway.

As investigators probed the crash, the families of the victims' loved ones hurled accusations amid their tears, medical workers tried to identify the bodies, many of which were badly burned. Most of the corpses were placed in body bags in an old terminal at the airport. Lined up in neat rows, the 70 or so bodies were placed in caskets of honey pine and dark mahogany wood. DNA tests were expected to be completed Thursday.

In addition to the 79 people who died in the accident, 39 were injured and 61 suffered minor injuries or escaped unhurt. Chang said 40 Americans were among the victims. Their relatives were rushing to Los Angeles International Airport for flights to Taiwan.

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