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Pakistani plane crash kills 17

By B.K. Bangash
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KOHAT, Pakistan — A Pakistani military plane crashed into a mountainside in dense fog Thursday in a remote region of northwestern Pakistan, killing all 17 people on board, including the chief of the air force.

The Fokker-27 turboprop lost contact with the control tower at the Kohat Air Base shortly before it was to land there, Pakistani officials said.

"This was an accident," Air Commodore Sarfraz Ahmad told reporters in the Islamabad, ruling out the possibility that the plane had been shot down on the edge of Pakistan's lawless tribal region. He said a board of inquiry will determine what caused the accident.

The crash killed air force chief Mushaf Ali Mir, 57, who was traveling from Islamabad to Kohat to conduct an annual inspection of the air base. He was accompanied by his wife, seven other air force officials and eight crew members when the plane went down about 16

miles from the base, Ahmad said.

"This is a national tragedy," Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali said, according to the Information Ministry.

Investigators were already at the site of the crash, about 120 miles northwest of Islamabad. Kohat, a town of 100,000 people ringed by mountains, is less than 50 miles from the border with Afghanistan.

A large piece of the plane's tail hugged the side of a 3,000-foot mountain. Strewed across the slope were other pieces of the aircraft, witnesses said.

The air force plane took off from Islamabad at 8 a.m. local time and was last heard from 27 minutes after takeoff. There were no distress calls from the aircraft, Ahmad told reporters.

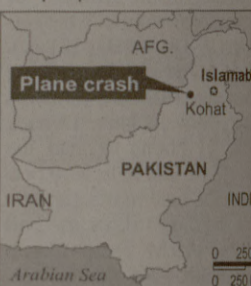
Residents of the area said fog was heavy Thursday morning when the aircraft went down.

The vice chief of the Pakistan Air Force, Syed Qaiser Hussain, has been appointed acting air force chief, Ahmad said.

Mir was born in the eastern city of Lahore and joined the air force in 1967. A decorated for-

Plane crashes in Pakistan

A Pakistani air force plane crashed Thursday in northwestern Pakistan, killing all 17 people on board.



SOURCES: ESRI, Associated Press

mer fighter pilot who took part in Pakistan's 1971 war against India, Mir took command of the air force in November 2000. He had two sons and a daughter.

"He was an excellent commander, and a hard core professional," Air Commodore Tabir Butt said of 57-year-old Mir. "He was very considerate. At times he would be very informal in wanting to know about the problems of his men."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Sean Astin attends Texas Film Festival

Actor Sean Astin, costar of "Lord of the Rings," will attend the Texas Film Festival Saturday at Rudder Theater.

Astin will be appearing Saturday at noon during the festival's "Sean Astin Tribute."

Thirty-two-year-old Astin gained stardom in 1985 after his role in "The Goonies" and then later as a Notre Dame football legend in "Rudy."

The tribute will include clips from Astin's movies, a speech by Astin, a viewing of his directorial debut short film, "The Long and the Short of It" and a question and answer session.

Tickets will cost \$6 and attendance at the Sean Astin Tribute will be limited to 750 people, and tickets are still available at the Rudder Box Office.

Gas prices soar across the U.S.

(AP) — The middle of winter looks more like the heat of summer at gas stations nationwide as fuel prices surge past \$2 a gallon in some places and motorists grumble about being gouged.

Political instability in Venezuela and the prospect of war in Iraq are triggering price hikes that normally don't kick in until the peak driving season. And experts warn prices could shoot up even more as the political situations and the weather heat up.

Air Force man convicted of attempted espionage

By Jonathan D. Salant
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — Former Air Force Master Sgt. Brian Patrick Regan was convicted Thursday of offering to sell U.S. intelligence information to Iraq and China. He was acquitted of attempted spying for Libya.

The U.S. District Court jury deliberated 24 hours over five days before returning the verdict. Regan showed no emotion as the verdict was read.

The jury resumed deliberations on whether Regan offered Iraq documents concerning nuclear weaponry, military satellites, war plans or other major U.S. weapons systems.

If the jury finds that he offered those secrets, he could be subject to the death penalty. Jurors would hear a second round of testimony to consider such a sentence.

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were the last Americans put to death for spying. They were executed in 1953 for conspiring to steal U.S. atomic secrets for the Soviet Union.

Regan, a 40-year-old married father of four from Bowie, Md., was arrested Aug. 23, 2001, at Dulles International

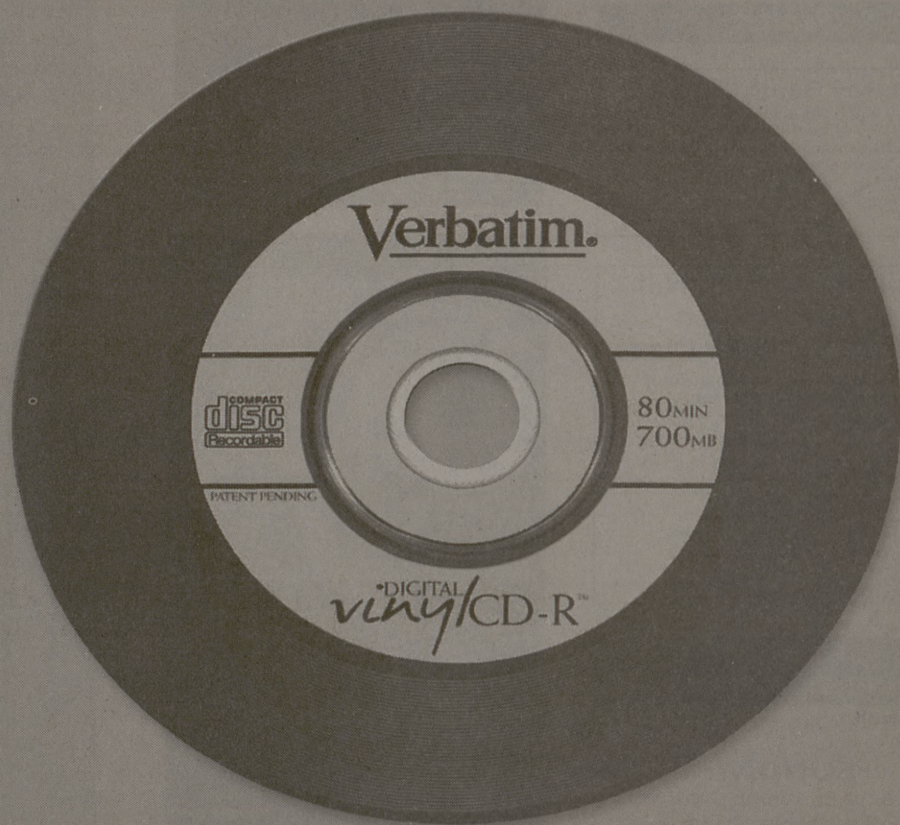
Airport outside Washington while boarding a flight for Zurich, Switzerland.

He was carrying information with the coded coordinates of Iraqi and Chinese missile sites, the missiles that were stored there, and the date the information was obtained. He also had the addresses of the Chinese and Iraqi embassies in Switzerland and Austria in his wallet and tucked into his right shoe.

Regan had worked at the National Reconnaissance Office, which operates the government's spy satellites, first for the Air Force and then as a civilian employee for TRW, a defense contractor.

It was unusual for the case to even reach trial. The government, wary of disclosing classified material in public, normally agrees to plea bargains in espionage cases.

It also was surprising that the government sought the death penalty in a case where prosecutors acknowledged sensitive material never was passed. In cases much more damaging to the government, the CIA's Aldrich Ames and the FBI's Robert Hanssen were sentenced to life in prison.



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