

EGYPT

# Russia, Britain ramp up to return tourists

Moscow sending 44 planes to repatriate 80,000 people while London starts flying out 20,000

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE in Cairo

Moscow and London were ramping up efforts to pull out thousands of stranded tourists from Sharm el-Sheikh on Sunday, after Egypt said it was too early to know whether a bomb brought down a Russian plane.

Britain and the United States suspect a bomb exploded on board the Airbus minutes after it took off from the Red Sea resort en route to St Petersburg, killing all 224 people on board.

Russia, which lost the most people in the disaster, has stopped all flights to Egypt and Britain has halted air travel to Sharm, while several other countries have warned their nationals not to fly to the resort due to security fears.

Tens of thousands of people have been left stranded for days by the clampdown, which Egyptians fear could deal a heavy blow to their vital tourism industry, already battered by years of unrest.

Egypt has dismissed a claim from Islamic State jihadists that they brought down the plane, and on Saturday the head of its investigative committee said the cause of the crash was still not clear.

"Initial observations ... do not allow for identifying the origin of the in-flight break-up" of the aircraft 23 minutes and 14 seconds after it departed from Sharm, Ayman el-Mokkadem said.

**"I have to fly out today at any cost; my son is getting married tomorrow, and I am still here."**

Jane Kelly, British holidaymaker

"A noise was heard in the last second" on the voice recorder, he said, adding: "A spectral analysis will be carried out by specialized labs in order to identify the nature of this sound."

Sources in France close to the probe said that black box data pointed to a bomb exploding and of the sudden, violent demise of the Airbus.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has said a bomb "had more likely than not" been the cause of the crash.

**Thousands stranded**

As the investigation continued, Britain and Russia were sending in planes to evacuate their nationals.

Russians comprise the bulk of tourists who visit Red Sea resorts such as Sharm el-Sheikh each year, and nearly 80,000 are currently in Egypt, a Russian official said.

Russia will send 44 planes to repatriate its nationals, the Russian Federal Air Transport Agency said, and repatriations are expected to take two weeks.

Britain has also started flying out the 20,000 people thought to be in Sharm el-Sheikh when the jet crashed just over a week ago, but officials warned the repatriation process could take days.

"With a limited number of flights able to leave Sharm el-Sheikh each day for the UK, it is likely that tour operators or airlines will advise some people to extend their stay," a government spokesman said.

Nine flights carrying almost 2,000 people flew back to Britain on Saturday — two easyJet, two Monarch, two Thomson, two Thomas Cook and one British Airways — after around 1,500 returned the previous day.

Eleven British aircraft are on standby in Cyprus, airport authorities said.

"I have to fly out today at any cost; my son is getting married tomorrow, and I am still here," said desperate British holidaymaker Jane Kelly.

**'It was madness'**

"It was madness," said Marc Standen, who arrived back in Britain on Saturday, describing the airport at Sharm.

"Their security is terrible and they are completely overwhelmed," he added.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the decision to restrict flights did not mean Moscow believed that the crash — the worst aviation disaster in Russia's history — was due to an attack.

The head of Russia's emergencies ministry said Russian experts had taken samples from the crashed jet and were testing for any traces of explosives.



**Dam burst takes toll**

A bag is removed from a house flooded with mud after a dam burst in Barra Longa, Brazil, on Saturday. The death toll from two collapsed dams at a Brazilian mine is certain to rise in coming days, a local mayor said, while up to 10 residents of the nearest village remain missing in addition to 13 miners. Two people have been confirmed dead. RICARDO MORAES / REUTERS

INDIA

# Modi concedes defeat in key state election

By AGENCIES in Patna, India

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi conceded defeat on Sunday in a key election in Bihar, one of India's poorest and largest states, in a major blow for the leader who fronted a no-holds barred campaign.

Modi's Hindu nationalist party was leading in only 58 seats in the 243-seat state assembly compared to 160 for a coalition of rival regional parties, as vote counting continued.

"Had a telephone conversation with Shri Nitish Kumar and congratulated him on the victory," Modi said on Twitter of his main opponent, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar.

Modi turned the Bihar poll



**Narendra Modi**, India's prime minister

into a key test of his popularity, addressing some 30 campaign rallies and promising voters billions of dollars for development in a state where two thirds lack access to electricity.

The premier's defeat was also a setback to his plans to push major economic reforms through the national parliament where his Bharatiya Jan-

ata Party lacks a majority.

Assembly elections are important not only because state leaders wield significant power, but because parties gain seats in India's upper house, where the BJP does not have the numbers.

Modi was up against an unlikely alliance of two powerful local leaders, Kumar and his predecessor Lalu Prasad Yadav, who has served time in prison for corruption.

As the contest tightened in recent weeks, the campaign shifted to bitter issues along religious and caste lines which have traditionally dominated the state of 100 million people, more than the population of Germany.

Coalition party workers danced in the street and set off fire crackers in celebration in the state capital Patna.

BJP spokesman GVL Narasimha Rao denied the loss was a personal blow for Modi, saying the odds were stacked against their party after regional rivals joined forces.

"This election was loaded against us. It is a defeat of the arithmetic," Rao said.

"Modi has delivered even in this election. It is because of his appeal that we managed a creditable performance," Rao said.

Modi, a Hindu nationalist, stormed to power at national polls in May 2014 promising sweeping reforms to revive the faltering economy.

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