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Yahaya-crash

HICOM CHIEF AND WIFE KILLED IN HELICOPTER TRAGEDY

KUALA LUMPUR, March 4 (Bernama) -- Malaysia lost one of its leading industrialists and Bumiputera entrepreneurs when Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad was killed in a tragic helicopter crash with his wife near Kuala Lipis about 250km here last night.

They were headed for Kuala Terengganu to visit Yahaya's mother who is very ill in Marang.

Also killed was Mej Azlizan Abdul Manas, the pilot of the six-seater Augusta-109 belonging to Gadek Aviation Helicopter Sdn Bhd, one of Yahaya's companies.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, were among those who left for Kuala Terengganu to pay their last respects.

Yahaya, 50, and his wife, Puan Sri Rahana Othman, 48, will be buried in Marang this evening before Maghrib prayers. They left behind two sons and daughters.

Mej Azlizan, 32, will be buried in Batu Pahat, also this afternoon. Azlizan who has a wife, a son and a daughter, joined the company after leaving the Royal Malaysian Air Force on Dec 31 last year with a 13 year service record.

Listed companies connected with Yahaya requested for suspension on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange until further notice.

They include Hicom Holdings, Diversified Resources Bhd, Golden Pharos, Kedah Cement, Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd, Edaran Otomobil Nasional, Gadek Malaysia, Gadek Capital and Eastern Pacific Industrial Corporation.

Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) director-general Haji Zaini Omar said the ill-fated aircraft took off from the Segambut helipad at 10.45pm but disappeared from the radar screen 30 minutes later.

The Malaysian Control Centre (MCC) was then activated. The aircraft was cruising at 9,000 ft before that.

At 1.33am, the DCA was informed by the police of the wreckage of the helicopter at Kampung Atok in Jerangsang, Benta, along the Kuala Lipis-Jerantut road.

The Meteorological Department reported that the weather was good over the area with clear skies and there was no rain at the time of the crash.

According to a witness, the helicopter was seen circling a few times before it exploded in mid-air.

Self-employed Zahidan Nor, 16, of Kampung Sungai Damar in the Mukim of Tanjung Besar in Kuala Lipis said that he earlier heard the drone of an aircraft.

He said that one moment the sound of the plane could be heard and the next moment it was silent.

"It later sounded like a car engine being started," he said at the scene of the crash.

"I saw it circling in the air and moments later it crashed," said Zahidan who was going to have a game of carrom in the compound of his house after watching the "Video Muzik" programme on television which ended at about 11pm.

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Another villager, Sulaiman Sakmah, 54, said he heard a sound like that of a motorcycle engine and went out of his house to check.

He heard two explosions and saw the aircraft spinning before crashing in flames.

Sulaiman said although the helicopter fell only 15 metres from his house, he had to use a boat to cross a river to reach the site.

The letters "DRB", believed to be at the tail end of the aircraft, could still be seen. Debris was scattered over a 500 sq metre area.

A sorrowful Deputy Prime Minister Anwar said he was among the last persons to see Yahaya alive.

Anwar, who was Yahaya's classmate at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, said he and the college's old boys hosted a party for their former teachers at his residence here last night.

"Yahaya was with us until 10pm. He informed me that his mother was sick in Kuala Terengganu before leaving the function with his wife Puan Sri Rahana," Anwar told reporters after opening the Malaysian International Furniture Fair '97 here.

"I was anxious about flying at night in a helicopter but Yahaya said he had to go because his mother was very ill. He did not look too cheerful because his mother was very ill," said Anwar who was informed at about 1am that the helicopter was missing.

Anwar then rushed over to Yahaya's house in Jalan Semarak to be with his children.

Asked whether the helicopter crash could be due to sabotage, Anwar said the police would carry out a full scale investigations into the incident but at this juncture, "we don't think there is any act of sabotage."

"It is too early to draw a conclusion but we have to look at the whole episode including the cause of the crash," said Anwar who described Yahaya's death as not only a personal loss to him but also the loss of a corporate leader whom the country was proud of. -- BERNAMA

TEAM AAM