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Thousands pay last respects to Yahaya (HL)

id; M.Jefri Razali; Jalina Joheng; Charlotte Nelson; Shareem Amry
KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - As Department of Civil Aviation investigators scrambled to unravel the cause of the helicopter crash which killed Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad, his wife and the pilot last night, the Terengganu-born industrialist was given a final send-off befitting a national leader in his hometown of Marang this evening.

Thousands of people thronged the car czar's village home shortly after the coffins bearing the remains of Yahaya and his wife, Puan Sri Rohana Othman, 50, arrived from Kuala Lipis where the Agusta 109 Power helicopter had crashed about 11pm.

Roads leading to and from Yahaya's house were choked with vehicles, especially chartered buses.

Diversified Resources Berhad-Hicom Group, of which Yahaya was the chairman and chief executive officer, chartered a Boeing 737 to ferry employees to Marang.

By early today, news of the death of the couple, who were on their way to Kuala Terengganu last night to visit the 51-year-old business tycoon's ailing mother, had brought political leaders, corporate figures, close friends, relatives, and the public to the doorstep of the family home.

Among the dignitaries were the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan of Terengganu, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Pahang Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, Terengganu Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad and Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

Also present were the Economic Adviser to the Government Tun Daim Zainuddin, Ministers Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Datuk Syed Hamid Albar, Datuk Mustapa Mohamed and Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud and corporate leaders Tan Sri Halim Saad and Tan Sri Wan Azmi Wan Hamzah.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali arrived at Yahaya's family house at 3.30pm accompanied by Wan Mokhtar and his wife Toh Puan Aishaitun Suhaimi.

Anwar and his wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail arrived at 5.10pm.

After paying his last respects, the Prime Minister, who was visibly upset, conveyed his condolences to Yahaya's daughters Yatina, 24, and Nadiya, 13.

The couple were buried in a common grave at the Marang Muslim cemetery about 7pm.

Yahaya's sons Ahmad Othman, 22, and Ahmad Faez, 21, undergraduates at Birmingham University, England, arrived at the cemetery at 7.35pm to join their sisters at the funeral.

Ahmad Othman said both of them reached the Federal capital this afternoon before rushing to Marang.

The couple, who were keenly awaiting the arrival of their first grandchild as Yatina was due to deliver soon, had spoken to their children prior to last night's flight.

Yahaya's death stunned the corporate sector as he was seen as an embodiment of Malaysia's newly-found confidence as an industrialising power and a shining example of the rising class of successful Bumiputera businessmen.

The pilot, Mej Azlizan Abdul Manas, who had just joined Gadek Aviation, a company linked to Yahaya and which operates the Agusta 109 Power helicopter, last December, was buried at 6pm at the Bagan Muslim cemetery

in Mukim Dua, Batu Pahat.

A 14-year veteran with the Royal Malaysian Air Force, he was described as very capable, having been a helicopter instructor pilot and a Nuri helicopter squadron leader.

News of the crash was flashed in today's edition of The Malay Mail and Harian Metro, the afternoon English and Bahasa Malaysia tabloids, which reported the aircraft went missing at midnight and the bodies of the three being found early this morning by Kuala Lipis police.

This morning, listed companies connected with Yahaya requested suspension on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange until further notice.

The companies included 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.

All companies linked to Yahaya will be closed until Monday as a sign of respect.

Meanwhile, the DCA has appointed a four-man team to investigate the crash.

The team is led by Captain Yahaya Abdul Rahman from the flight operations division with the assistance of three engineers.

"The investigation is going to be complex and tedious ... it will probably take a week before we can have the preliminary findings," DCA director-general Zaini Omar told newsmen at the crash site.

Efforts to piece together the last seconds of the crash were expected to be a difficult task considering the Agusta 109 Power helicopter is not equipped with a "black box", comprising the flight data and voice recorders.

(In commercial jetliners, the voice recording equipment records the final conversation between the control tower and pilot prior to a crash, giving some indication to investigators on what could have transpired before a crash, while the flight data recorder provides the aircraft's performance data like speed, height and direction).

Zaini said it was premature to confirm if the helicopter had experienced engine trouble.

He said police confirmed sighting the wreckage of the helicopter at Kampung Sungai Damak, at 1.33am today, about 25 nautical miles southwest of Kuala Lipis.

He said the radar controller at the DCA Air Traffic Control Centre in Subang lost contact with the helicopter at 11.15pm yesterday.

"The radar controller saw the aircraft circling the area before it disappeared from the radar screen," he said.

It took off from the Segambut helipad in Kuala Lumpur at 10.45pm and it was scheduled to arrive in Kuala Terengganu about 11.52pm.

"There was no indication that the helicopter pilot was facing engine problem, as there was no 'May Day' (distress signal) call," he said.

Upon loss of radar contact with the helicopter, the Kuala Lumpur Rescue Co-ordination Centre was activated and it immediately launched search and rescue operations.

The 109 Power, believed to have rolled out of the Agusta SpA factory in Rome, Italy, in March last year, was delivered initially to Mofaz Air, which is responsible for marketing the aircraft in Malaysia.

It was one of three 109 Power models, sold to Gadek Aviation late last year. The company operates from the Segambut helipad.

The other two, 109C models, are believed to have been sold by Mofaz to a timber tycoon in Pahang and a private hospital in Kuala Lumpur.

On claims made by villagers that they heard two explosions before the helicopter crashed, Zaini said the team would verify them after analysing

the wreckage.

"The residents told us the aircraft was spluttering in the air with the sound of the engine being turned on and off.

"About 30 seconds later they heard an explosion followed by another soon after."

Prior to the departure, Yahaya and wife had attended a dinner for former Malay College Kuala Kangsar students and teachers at Anwar's residence in Kuala Lumpur.

It is learnt that the most hazardous stretch of the journey was to clear the aircraft over the Main Range, which the pilot did just before 11pm.

The pilot was flying about 3,000 metres before he began to descend to about 2,000 metres when the radar blip denoting the aircraft's position on screen at the Subang Air Traffic Control Centre disappeared.

At about the same time, villagers alerted the police on their sighting of an aircraft which appeared to be having trouble and had crashed, said Pahang police chief Datuk Abas Johar.

A 25-strong police team was sent to the scene and by 1.30am today, the charred remains of Yahaya, his wife and Azlizan were found.

When policemen and firemen arrived at the scene, the helicopter wreckage was burning.

They combed the area and found a pair of woman's shoes, believed to belong to Rohana, and Azlizan's briefcase.

He said the DCA would request the army to carry out a sweep of the area to ensure all pieces of the wreckage were accounted for.

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