Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

Agency for International Development Washington D.C. 20523

BOLIVIA - Air Crash

Date: January 1, 1985

Location: Mount Illimani, southeast of La Paz

No. Dead: 29

No. Affected: None reported

Damage: Boeing 727 airplane destroyed

The Disaster

On the evening of January 1, 1985 an Eastern Airlines Boeing 727 approaching La Paz's El Alto airport slammed into Illimani mountain, killing everyone aboard. El Alto, the world's highest airport, is built on a plateau amid the Andes at an elevation of 4,100 m. It is also considered one of the most treacherous airports; pilots approaching the airport must skirt the imposing Mt. Illimani before descending to the runway below. Eastern flight 980 was embarked on a routine flight from Asuncion, Paraguay when, for reasons still unknown, the plane failed to bypass the 6,463-m mountain. The wreckage of the plane was found buried in the snow where it crashed at 5,975 m.

Among the 29 people (19 passengers and 10 crew members) aboard the aircraft were eight U.S. citizens, including the wife of the U.S. Ambassador to Paraguay and the Director of the U.S. Peace Corps in Paraguay. When rescue workers reached the crash site, they found no survivors.

Action Taken by the Government of Bolivia (GOB) and Non-Governmental Organizations

When flight 980 failed to regain contact with the control tower and was presumed downed, the GOB promptly organized search planes, both military and private, to find the missing Boeing 727. The crash site was spotted

late in the day on January 2. Once the crash site was located, the GOB deployed two Lama helicopters to assist in the rescue effort. It was soon discovered, however, that these helicopters lacked the capability to work at altitudes exceeding 4,575 m (15,000 ft.).

The local Red Cross and the Bolivian Alpine Club assembled a team of 19 expert climbers to ascend Mt. Illimani and investigate the crash site. The threat of avalanche, high altitude conditions, and inclement weather complicated the rescue effort. Three climbers eventually reached the downed aircraft and confirmed that there were no survivors.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

The U.S. Embassy, through its Defense Attache Office, joined the air search mounted by the GOB. When it became evident that the GOB did not possess the resources needed to reach the crashed plane, the Deputy Chief of Mission declared on January 4 that the situation constituted a disaster warranting U.S. assistance. The GOB requested help in procuring the use of a helicopter capable of working at 6,907 m (20,000 ft.). OFDA sought DOD support in airlifting an S-70 experimental helicopter (Blackhawk), capable of high-altitude hovering, and a crew of eight to assist in the rescue operation. The cost of the DOD C-141 used to transport the helicopter was \$76,668. United Technologies of Hartford, Connecticut loaned the helicopter and support personnel. After the Bolivian climbing team established that there were no survivors, deployment of the high-altitude helicopter to the crash site was cancelled.

At the request of the GOB, the Federal Aviation Administration sent a Five-person team to assist in the search for the aircraft and investigation of the cause of the crash. In addition, the National Transportation Safety Board dispatched a nine-member team to participate in the accident investigation.

Summary of USG Assistance

Ambassador':	s Authority	used for	logistics	and local	costs\$25,000
DOD airlift	support				\$76,668

TOTAL \$101,668

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies and Other Private Organizations

Eastern Airlines - When flight 980 was reported overdue, Eastern Airlines conducted a land search of the populated areas along the plane's approach path to determine if anyone had sighted the aircraft. At the request of the Foreign Minister, an eight-member air crash team was flown in by company jet to assist the GOB in the search for the missing airplane and in the subsequent aircrash investigation.

Assistance Provided by the International Community

None reported.