

Crash of U.N. helicopter claims 12 lives in Bosnia-Herzegovina

PROKOSKO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — A U.N. helicopter slammed into a fog-shrouded mountain in central Bosnia and burst into flames Wednesday, killing a top international envoy, five Americans and six others in the worst accident to hit the peacekeeping effort in Bosnia.

Those killed included German envoy Gerd Wagner, a deputy to top peace mediator Carlos Westendorp, and British diplomat Charles Morpeth. The others who died were not named pending notification of family.

Four Ukrainian crew members of the U.N. helicopter — an Mi-8 leased from Ukraine — survived the crash, two of them with light injuries, German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel said.

The crew managed to escape through the shattered glass nose of the craft, but was hindered from helping passengers because of fire and thick smoke.

Wagner and his delegation, which included members from Westendorp's office as well as U.N. employees believed to be police monitors, left Sarajevo for Bugojno (pronounced BOO-goy-no) this morning, said Alexander Ivanko, a U.N. spokesman in Sarajevo.

According to one Ukrainian crew

member, the weather was fine when they left Sarajevo, but they encountered "dense fog" west of Fojnica, 20 miles east of Bugojno, said U.N. spokesman Liam McDowall. When the pilot attempted to gain altitude, the helicopter crashed into the mountain and burst into flames, McDowall said.

Foul play is not suspected in the crash, but an investigation was underway.

The crash appeared similar to one in April 1996, when a plane carrying U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown plowed into a mountain in a heavy storm while traveling to Dubrovnik, Croatia. Brown and 34 others aboard were killed.

Witness Halid Huskic said residents of Prokosko, a mountain village perched above a lake, saw Wednesday's chopper crash. Hearing shouts, they clambered down, and saw four uniformed men pulling a fifth man from the wreck, he said. Then several explosions — caused either by fuel or ammunition — prevented anyone from approaching the helicopter, he added.

Villagers managed to summon help about 90 minutes after the crash. Dr. Damir Jaganjac of the nearby town of Fojnica said he found 11 burned bodies — one of them so

charred that only a skull and ribs remained.

One survivor's clothes were burning as doctors carried him away on a stretcher, Jaganjac said. Having no water, they ripped open plastic bags of emergency glucose drips to douse the flames.

"This is the worst day I have experienced in my life," said Kai Eide, special representative to the U.N. secretary-general. "The work these officials were carrying out was essential to ensure that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina can live in peace."

Westendorp spoke sadly of the "the death of such dedicated and selfless servants of the peace process."

Wagner, 55, was responsible for easing the return of refugees to their pre-war homes — one of the make-or-break elements of the U.S.-brokered Dayton peace accord, signed in December 1995.

In place only since June, Wagner helped smooth the contentious relations between the Muslims and Croats who are supposed to cooperate in governing their half of Bosnia. Bosnian Serbs control the other half.

Wagner's first posting after joining the German Foreign Ministry in 1971 was in Belgrade, capital of Yugoslavia, now made up of Serbia and Montenegro.

Abbot indicted for bilking own bank

OMAHA (AP) — James E. Abbott, the former majority shareholder of one of the largest banks in western Nebraska, has been accused of cheating on income taxes and defrauding his own bank.

Abbott, 47, of Lincoln, was indicted by a federal grand jury Wednesday, along with Morris R. Shields, 66, of Lincoln, who was a partner in the Lincoln office of Coopers & Lybrand at the time of the alleged offenses.

The 15-count indictment, released Wednesday by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Omaha, charges Abbott and Shields with various counts of filing a false tax return, assisting in filing a false return, bank fraud, false entry in bank records and conspiracy.

Speaking for Abbott, attorney Terence Boyle of Denver called the indictment "nonsensical."

"To the extent that the accountants made errors in the preparation of these returns, the errors were certainly not the result of any criminal conspiracy, as the U.S. attorney alleges," Boyle said. "Seriously, who would defraud their own bank?"

The indictment alleges that from

mid-September 1987 to Feb. 24, 1994, Abbott and Shields caused the Abbott Bank to pay about \$239,506 in professional accounting fees. In fact, those tax services were provided to James Abbott alone.

Additionally, the indictment says, the defendants evaded payment of about \$40,928 in corporate income tax payable by the Abbott Bank Group Inc. and \$4,915 in individual income tax payable by James Abbott.

Shields' Omaha attorney, Tyler Gaines, expressed contempt for the indictment.

Gaines said Shields helped neither Abbott nor the bank with tax returns. He said that Shields was "absolutely innocent."

James Abbott sued Coopers & Lybrand in 1995, alleging that the accounting firm prepared false or inaccurate returns for him from 1987 through 1994.

Abbott contended in the suit that the firm charged the bank for services conducted for Abbott. The bank paid \$241,027 for services that should have been the liability of Abbott, the suit said.

The suit is pending, said Carl Sjulian, a Coopers & Lybrand attorney in Lincoln.



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