

Navy Jet Crashes Into Va. Apartments

BY ZINIE CHEN SAMPSON
Associated Press

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. — Emergency crews searched the charred remains of a Virginia Beach apartment complex Friday after a fighter jet crashed into it just after takeoff in what Navy officials called a “catastrophic mechanical malfunction.”

Two Navy pilots — a student and an instructor from nearby Naval Air Station Oceana — ejected just before the jet careened into the apartment complex, demolishing sections of some buildings and engulfing others in flames. Some 40 apartment units were damaged or destroyed in the crash, but hours later no fatalities had been reported.

Seven people, including both pilots, were taken to a hospital. All except one of the pilots were released by late afternoon.

Virginia Beach Fire Department Capt. Tim Riley said more than two dozen residents remained unaccounted for, although all but the six most damaged apartments had been searched.

“What I’m praying for, what I’m thinking about now is that we don’t find any more victims,” Virginia Beach Mayor Will Sessoms told reporters.

The two-seat F18 Hornet had dumped loads of fuel before crashing, though it wasn’t clear if that was because of a malfunction or an intentional maneuver by the pilots, said Capt. Mark Weisgerber with U.S. Fleet Forces Command. The jet went down less than 10 miles from Oceana.

Bruce Nedelka, the Virginia Beach EMS division chief, said witnesses saw fuel being dumped from the jet before it went down, and that fuel was found on buildings and vehicles in the area.

The plane not having as much fuel on board “mitigated what could have been an absolute massive, massive fireball and fire,” Nedelka said. “With all of that jet fuel dumped, it was much less than what it could have been.”

The crash happened in the Hampton Roads area, which has a large concentration of military bases, including Naval Station Norfolk, the largest naval base in the world. Naval Air Station Oceana, where the F/A-18D that crashed was assigned, is located in Virginia Beach. Both the pilots were from Virginia Beach, Weisgerber said.

Weisgerber said he did not know how many times the student pilot had been in the air, but



JOE FUDGE/NEWPORT NEWS DAILY PRESS/MCT
Emergency and fire crews respond at an apartment complex, near Naval Air Station Oceana, that was struck by a Navy jet in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Friday.

that the instructor was “extremely experienced.”

Dozens of police cars, fire trucks and other emergency vehicles filled the densely populated neighborhood where the plane crashed. Yellow fire hoses snaked through side streets as fire crews poured water on the charred rooftops of brick apartment houses. By late afternoon, the fire had been put out.

Residents of the apartment complex described a confusing scene and an apologetic pilot.

Colby Smith said his house started shaking and then the power went out, as he saw a red and orange blaze outside his window. He ran outside, where he saw billowing black smoke and then came upon the pilot as he ran to a friend’s home.

“I saw the parachute on the house and he was still connected to it, and he was laying on the ground with his face full of blood,” Smith told WVEC-TV.

“The pilot said, I’m sorry for destroying your house.”

Smith said he and another man helped the pilot onto the street.

Patrick Kavanaugh, who lives in the complex where the jet crashed, opened up his sliding glass door after hearing a loud explosion and saw one of the jet’s pilots on the ground with blood on his face. Kavanaugh said the pilot, whom he described as a “young boy,” was very upset and apologetic.

“The poor guy was in shock. I checked for broken bones and opened wounds,” said Kavanaugh, who spent 23 years in the rescue squad and retired in 1996.

Despite having suffered several heart attacks and open-heart surgery, Kavanaugh said his old rescue skills kicked in as he dragged the pilot around the corner and away from the fire before several other explosions occurred.

Syrian Refugees Flee Violence Ahead Of Truce

BY ANDREA GLIOTTI
AND ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY
Associated Press

REYHANLI, Turkey — After days of relentless shelling and sniper attacks, thousands of Syrian refugees streamed across the border into Turkey with horrific accounts Friday of mass graves, massacres and burned-out homes.

The latest reports of escalating violence fueled accusations that President Bashar Assad is rushing to stamp out as much of the year-old uprising as he can before a U.N.-brokered cease-fire next week.

The trigger for the new waves of refugees was an offensive in Idlib province, which borders Turkey and has become increasingly rebellious against the Assad regime.

Activists reported about 100 dead in the villages of Taftanaz and Killi in recent days.

A photograph provided to The Associated Press by a Syrian activist showed at least a dozen corpses wrapped in blankets in what appeared to be a mass grave in Taftanaz. The AP could not verify the authenticity of the photograph, but witnesses also described a mass grave.

“They destroyed the whole village,” a refugee who asked to be identified by only one name, Anas, told the AP on Friday after fleeing Killi. “If he has to kill, Bashar would even kill 1 million people. He doesn’t care.”

Hikmet Saban, another Syrian refugee who reached Turkey, described the devastation in



VICTOR J. BLUE/MCT
Eyad is a Syrian who was wounded in fighting in Taftanaz. An estimated 82 Syrians were killed in an assault by forces of Bashar Al Assad in Idlib province.

Taftanaz, located several miles outside the city of Idlib.

“Helicopters and tanks are bombarding continuously,” he told Turkey’s state-run Anadolu agency. “Taftanaz has been burnt to the ground for three days.” Activists posted video they said showed a helicopter gunship firing a missile at Taftanaz and a mosque hit by shelling.

The escalating violence has dimmed hopes that the fighting, which the U.N. says has killed more than 9,000 people, will end anytime soon. The country appears to be spiraling toward civil war — a fearsome development that could bring a regional conflagration.

A vital geopolitical linchpin, Syria borders five other nations and has close ties to Iran and powerful militant groups, such as

Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

Assad last week accepted a cease-fire deadline brokered by international envoy Kofi Annan, which calls for his forces to pull out of towns and cities by Tuesday and for everyone to lay down their arms by 6 a.m. local time Thursday.

Western leaders have cast doubt on Assad’s intentions, suggesting he is playing for time and is not serious about the plan, which aims to pave the way for talks between the regime and the opposition on a political solution.

Syria denies that the revolt is a popular uprising at all, saying instead that it is facing a foreign conspiracy by armed gangs and terrorists who want to destroy the country.

The revolt began in March 2011 with mostly peaceful protests, but

the violent government crackdown has led many to take up weapons. A fighting force called the Free Syrian Army, made up largely of army defectors, is determined to bring down the regime by force of arms.

On Friday, Syria’s state-run news agency, SANA, appeared to acknowledge the recent spike in violence, but again blamed terrorism.

Syria sent letters to the United Nations and U.N. Security Council that said “acts committed by terrorists groups escalated especially after the agreement over Kofi Annan’s plan was reached,” SANA reported.

But witnesses who streamed in Turkey said regime forces were driving the bloodshed.

Ahmad, a refugee from Taftanaz who, like other witnesses, asked only to be identified by his first name, said families were forced to bury the dead in a “collective grave.”

He said the shelling stopped only when the soldiers needed more ammunition.

Mali Attracts Islamist Fighters, al-Qaida

NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Al-Qaida militants and other Islamist fighters are descending on northern Mali in the chaotic aftermath of a military coup, creating a potential haven for terrorists in a part of the Sahara bristling with heavy weapons looted from Libya.

Tuareg rebels declared an independent state in the region on Friday amid a power vacuum in the north created by the president’s March 21 ouster. The rapidly unfolding events are turning the area, which the Tuaregs now call the Azawad nation, into a magnet for jihadists, much like Afghanistan was when the Taliban took power 15 years ago.

Witnesses in northern Mali and those who have fled to neighboring Niger say they have seen fighters from Algeria, Mauritania and Nigeria in the past week.

In the late 1990s, terrorism training camps were set up in Afghanistan, where al-Qaida was able to operate openly and plot attacks largely unhindered. Now experts warn that Mali, a vast and impoverished Saharan nation in northwest Africa, could play a similar role.

Witnesses in the northern city of Gao, which fell to rebels on March 31, said fighters include people speaking a Mauritanian dialect of Arabic and English. The English-speakers are Nigerians who are believed to belong to the radical Islamist sect Boko Haram, which bombed the U.N. headquarters in Nigeria’s capital last year, killing 25 people.

Calif. College Votes To Delay 2-Tiered Fee Scale

SANTA MONICA, Calif. (AP) — The board of trustees at Santa Monica College voted Friday to postpone a two-tiered fee scale that brought angry campus protests where students were pepper-sprayed.

The board decided at an emergency meeting to wait on a plan to deal with budget cuts by offering high-demand core courses at about four times the regular price.

On the 6-0 vote, the board followed the recommendation of college President Chui Tsang, who circulated a memo before the meeting urging that the plan be put on hold at least for summer classes to allow more time for community input.

His request to the board also hinted at the college funding woes that prompted the fee plan.

“I must warn that this postponement in no way addresses the state funding crisis and the lack of seats for our students to progress in a timely way,” said the resolution obtained by The Associated Press.

Jobs Report Presents Challenges To Candidates

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation’s steady-but-modest job growth presents political challenges for both of November’s all-but-certain presidential rivals.

Republican Mitt Romney needs an ailing economy to fully exploit his image as a “Mr. Fix-It” who can restore the nation’s financial health, as he turned around the troubled 2002 Winter Olympics. President Barack Obama needs job-creation momentum to persuade voters that things are moving in the right direction, even if millions of people remain unemployed.

Friday’s neither-hot-nor-cold jobs report leaves both campaigns unsure of whether they can sell their narratives. Employers added 120,000 jobs last month, about half the December-February pace and well short of the 210,000 economists were expecting. Still, the unemployment rate declined from 8.3 percent in February to 8.2 percent, the lowest since about the time Obama took office.

GOP leaders were quick to note that the rate dropped largely because many Americans stopped looking for work and were not counted in the government survey.

The U.S. jobs picture was bleaker when Romney began his second presidential bid a year ago, emphasizing his experience in running the Olympic games and reorganizing companies while at Bain Capital. He said jobs grew during his four years as Massachusetts governor, but critics note that other states had more robust growth.

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