

12 hrs.

CALLING ATTENTION TO MATTERS OF URGENT PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

(j) IAF HELICOPTER CRASH NEAR POONCH

Shri Ranga (Chittoor): Sir, I call the attention of the Minister of Defence to the following matter of urgent public importance and I request that he may make a statement thereon:—

The IAF helicopter crash near Poonch on the 22nd November, 1963 resulting in the unfortunate death of some of our senior officers of the armed forces.

The Minister of Defence (Shri Y. B. Chavan): Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the Calling Attention Notice I have received regarding the Helicopter crash near Poonch, I would like to place before the House the following facts regarding the accident.

2. The General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Command, Lt. General Daulat Singh and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Air Command, Air Vice-Marshal E. W. Pinto were on an inspection tour in the Poonch area on 22nd November 1963. These two officers arrived at Poonch by a Dakota from Delhi at 10.25 hours. Air Commodore Murat Singh, Air Officer Commanding, J & K, and Lt.-General Bikram Singh, the Corps Commander, had arrived at Poonch in a Dakota from Udhampur at 9.40 A.M. that day. The Divisional Commander Major-General Nana-wati arrived at Poonch that morning in the ill-fated helicopter along with Flt.-Lt. Sodhi, who was at its controls. Brigadier Uberoi was already there. Another helicopter piloted by Flight Lt. Lalwani reached Poonch at 10.55 hours that day.

3. The General Officers were desirous of inspecting certain outposts

around Poonch. These outposts have been reced by Flt. Lt. Sodhi, the Captain of the ill-fated helicopter, on the 19th November 1963.

4. As the party started out on its inspection, the Air Officer Commanding in Chief (AVM Pinto) asked Flt. Lt. Sodhi whether both the helicopters could land at the place Jhalas they were going. Flt. Lt. Sodhi reported that the helipad at that spot was small and dusty and could not take two helicopters. The Air Officer Commanding in Chief conferred with the GOC-in-C and decided that for the first part of the trip, one helicopter only will be used and that the party would redistribute themselves into two helicopters when they arrived at the second station Surankot. Accordingly, the second helicopter captained by Flt. Lt. Lalwani was ordered to proceed direct to the second station with Air Commodore Murat Singh to await the arrival of the other officers. The Corps Commander, the Divisional Commander, the Brigade Commander, the AOC-in-C, West Air Command and the GOC-in-C got into the helicopter piloted by Flt. Lt. Sodhi and proceeded to the first station. After completing the work at that place, the party again got into the helicopter and headed for the second station, which was about 15 miles away. The route to be followed was along the river Poonch. About three minutes after getting airborne, the helicopter executed a turn to the right along the river, when it seems to have flown into two parallel lines of telegraph cables which had been suspended across the river. The cables were stretched between two sets of poles on the cliffs on the river side; on one side, it was 300 ft. high over the river bed and on the opposite bank about 100 ft. high. The helicopter seems to have struck these cables at a height of 200—250 feet and crashed into the river bed approximately 400 yards from where it hit the cables.

5. Flt. Lt. Sodhi, the Captain of the ill-fated helicopter, was a very

(Shri Y. B. Chavan)

experienced pilot with over 600 hours of helicopter flying experience and conversant with the J & K area. As already mentioned, he had carried out a special recce of this area on the 19th November. Apparently, he had not noticed these cables.

6. The Army Headquarters has standing instructions issued in March 1953 which restricts the number of senior officers that can travel in a particular aircraft. The existing orders state as follows:—

“1. It has been decided to restrict the number of Army Officers of the rank of Major General and above that may travel in a DAKOTA or a DEVON as follows:—

(a) DAKOTA

Major Generals and above: three (of which NOT more than one to be Army Commander and NOT more than two to be PSOs). (Shri H. V. Kamath: It was unfortunately disregarded.)

(b) DEVON

Major Generals and above: two (of which NOT more than one to be Army Commander and NOT more than one to be a PSO).

2. In either type of aircraft the C-in-C and the CGS should NOT travel together.”

This restriction was in consequence of an accident in which a Devon aircraft carrying four senior Army officers had to forceland. The then President brought this to the notice of the then Defence Minister and suggested that if a number of top ranking officers have to go to any particular place, it is worthwhile their taking separate planes because any serious accident would place the country in great difficulty if unfortunately anything untoward happened. The Defence Minister wrote to the then Com-

mander-in-Chief, Army who arranged for the issue of the above instructions. Simultaneously, detailed examination about the restrictions to be issued on the travel by VIPs and important civil and military officials in aircraft was carried out and it was decided at the end of 1954 that it was not necessary to lay down any hard and fast rules in the matter. Air travel was deemed comparatively safe and accidents may happen not only in the air but while travelling in a car or in a train. The instructions issued by the Army Headquarters, however, continued, as Service officers do a good bit of their flying in service aircraft and in operational conditions.

7. Though the above instructions may not in terms apply to travel by a helicopter, the spirit of these instructions was in the minds of the senior officers when they were at Poonch on the fateful day. Two helicopters were also available at Poonch. But the situation was such that two helicopters could not simultaneously reach the place of inspection. From the next station, the party intended to travel in separate helicopters. Precautions had also been taken to recce the area. Unfortunately, the existence of these wires was not noticed with fatal consequences.

8. The Chief of the Air Staff has constituted a Committee of Inquiry consisting of the following officers to enquire into the circumstances leading to the aircraft:

1. Air Vice Marshal R. Rajaram, Deputy Chief of Air Staff—Chairman.
2. Colonel Gurdas Singh.
3. Group Capt. R. D. Mehra.
4. Wing Commander Jaspal Singh.
5. Wing Commander S. K. Majumdar.

6. Wing Commander C. B. J. Alexander,

7. Sqn. Ldr. Dalaya.

An officer of the Intelligence Bureau is assisting in the inquiry. The Court reached the site of the accident on the 23rd November. It has completed local investigation and returned to Delhi on the afternoon of the 25th. The report is expected shortly.

Shri Ranga: I would like to know what security measures and also technical examinations by ground engineers and others concerned do obtain and were made before this helicopter took off on that day. May I know also whether it is regular for them to see, and whether any efforts were made on that day also to see, that no explosives etc. like time-bombs are secreted or were secreted on that day in that helicopter? If no such instructions are there, and no such examinations had been made, why should that be so?

Now, we have been informed that an inquiry had been ordered. While the inquiry is still going on, when Government do not know all the facts, how is it that the Prime Minister ventured to suggest that there could be no sabotage?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member has mixed up so many questions.

The Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs and Minister of Atomic Energy (Shri Jawaharlal Nehru): May I just say something in regard to the last part of the hon. Member's question? What I said was that an inquiry was being held and the inquiry would go into this matter. Thus far, no evidence has been received or met with suggesting sabotage. I qualified it by saying 'thus far'.

Shri Ranga: Was it a responsible statement to be made by the Prime Minister?

Shri Jawaharlal Nehru: That is for you and the House to judge.

Shri Ranga: Where was the need to offer an opinion?

Shri Hem Barua (Gauhati): Would not that statement of the Prime Minister vitiate the inquiry?

Shri Tyagi (Dehra Dun): The term 'thus far' does not.

Shri Y. B. Chavan: As regards the first part of the question asked by Shri Ranga, I would say that normal precautions are always taken about the security of the plane concerned. My preliminary information shows that the normal precautions were taken in the case particularly of this helicopter as well, but certainly, for all the detailed views, I think that it is better that we await the report of the committee.

Shri Krishnapal Singh (Jalesar): The hon. Defence Minister has stated that the helicopter met with an accident on account of the telegraph wires. I would like to know on what evidence he bases this observation. Since there were no survivors, how does he come to know that the helicopter met with the accident on account of the telegraph wires?

Shri Y. B. Chavan: With the preliminary information that we have. But, at the same time, as I have said we shall have to await the report of the inquiry before taking a final view.

श्री विश्वान प्रसाद (लालगंज) :
श्री डीफेंस मिनिस्टर साहब ने कहा कि फ्लाइट लेफ्टिनेट मॉयी उसी रास्ते से तीन चार दिन पहले गये थे। मेरी समझ में नहीं आता कि जब एक दफे वे उसी रास्ते से जा चुके थे और उन को उस रास्ते का अनुभव हो गया था तो फिर किस तरह इसने हेलिकॉप्टर का ऐक्सिडेंट हो गया।

अध्यक्ष महोदय : क्या आप को यही दर्याप्त करता है। अगर आप को कुछ और पूछना है तो पूछ लीजिये।

श्री यशपाल सिंह (कैराना) : जो हेलिकोप्टर गिरा है वह किस देश का बना हुआ था ?

श्री यशवन्तराव खड्गण : वह फ्रांस का बना हुआ था ।

Shri Swell (Assam-Autonomous District): The Defence Minister has just now stated that the pilot of this helicopter, Flight Lieutenant Sodhi was an experienced pilot, and he was well acquainted with the terrain in Kashmir and the area over which it flew. He has also stated that the accident was caused by the helicopter hitting the telegraph wires. May I know whether those wires have been there right through or they were put up only a few days before the fatal accident?

Shri Y. B. Chavan: It seems that they were there all the time, and the Flight Lieutenant had taken the 'recce' only two days before the accident took place.

Shri Warrior (Trichur): May I know whether Government have issued any fresh instructions regarding the flight of these officers in that operational area, to avoid the recurrence of such accidents?

Shri Y. B. Chavan: Certainly, we shall have to consider all these aspects after we receive the report of the inquiry.

Shri L. N. Bhanja Deo (Keonjhar): In view of this incident, may I know from the hon. Minister whether Government are contemplating to tighten the orders to the staff and to ensure that they should not be broken except in very exceptional circumstances?

Shri Y. B. Chavan: I think that I have answered this question already.

Shri Joachim Alva (Kanara): The hon. Minister is aware that the risks faced by the men in the Indian Air

Force in peace-time are definitely more than those faced by the men in the other services. Is there any scheme in the Ministry of Defence by way of setting up a special benevolent fund which may be given by way of compensation for people—officers and men—in the IAF who crash? Or has the Ministry got any scheme through the LIC, a government-sponsored body, to give extra compensation so as to bring it in line...

Mr. Speaker: Order, order. He has put the question. Let it be answered. He is making a speech.

Shri Joachim Alva:.....with the compensation given in civil airlines?

Shri Y. B. Chavan: There are some benevolent funds at the disposal of every service. Possibly they might make use of that. I cannot think of any specific scheme at the present moment about it.

Shri S. M. Banerjee (Kanpur): May I know whether the same type of helicopter, Alouette, had to force-land during the last operation in the Ladakh area? Was it considered safe that the same type of helicopters should be used for such purposes? Also, whether the officer, Shri Sodhi, who carried out the reconnaissance, knew on the 19th that there were poles in that particular area?

Shri Y. B. Chavan: As far as the first part of the question is concerned, I can say that certainly most aircraft had sometime had to force-land etc. But some stray cases of force-landing do not help us in taking a final view about the helicopter. I can say from personal experience that Alouette is perhaps the safest helicopter to travel in hilly tract.

Shri S. M. Banerjee: What about the second part? It is very important.

Mr. Speaker: Let the report come. How can it be said whether it was known to him on the 19th?

Shri S. M. Banerjee: Please hear me. This happened in an area 2½ miles from the cease fire line. My information is...

Mr. Speaker: Whatever his information may be, who can tell whether he had that knowledge?

Shri Hem Barua: About the wires also, it is not very certain that the wires did not exist.

Mr. Speaker: I had called the hon. Member for the next item.

Shri Nath Pai (Rajapur): I had also given my name in connection with this notice. Unfortunately, it does not appear in the list. I would not like to quarrel with you on that. If you will permit me, I will ask a question.

Mr. Speaker: His name is in the second one.

Shri Nath Pai: In the first also.

Mr. Speaker: I will have the original taken out and see if his name is there. Shri Hem Barua.

डा० राम मनोहर लोहिया (फरुखा-बाद) : अगर एक एक दल को एक एक सवाल प्राप पूछ लेने देते तो अच्छा होता ।

अध्यक्ष महोदय : नहीं साहब, मेरी दरखास्त है कि जो सारा प्रोसीजर बना हुआ है उस को उसी तरह से चलने दें ।

(ii) IAF DAKOTA CRASH NEAR BANIHAL PASS

Shri Hem Barua: I call the attention of the Minister of Defence to the following matter of urgent public importance and request that he may make a statement thereon:

The I.A.F. Dakota crash near Banihal Pass on the 22nd November 1963.

Shri Y. B. Chavan: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I regret to inform the House that a

flying accident involving an I.A.F. Dakota aircraft occurred at 1022 hours on the 22nd November 1963 over the Banihal Pass. The aircraft was on flight from Srinagar in connection with the move of the Squadron to its winter base. The crew of the aircraft consisted of the following officers:—

Fg. Offr. S. S. Sidhu, G.D. (P).

Plt. Offr. D. Gupta, G.D. (P).

Plt. Offr. V. K. Sahasrabudhe, G.D. (N).

Plt. Offr. M. V. Singh, G.D. (P).

The following civilian employees were on board the aircraft.

Shri N. C. Chetty, Lascar

Shri Majumdar, Lascar

Shri Agnailik

Shri Alrish Radge

2. The aircraft took off from Srinagar at 1004 hours on 22nd November 1963 and reported position over Banihal Pass at 1022 hours. It was due to land at Jammu at about 1059 hours. When it was over due to land at Jammu, a search was undertaken for the missing aircraft. Four aircraft and helicopters were immediately deployed for the purpose but with no result. The search continued on the following days and the wreckage was located on 24th November 1963 on the side of a steep hill, about 12 miles from Banihal Pass.

3. In order to reach the site of the wreckage, an IAF helicopter attempted twice to land but it could not do so because of the steep slope of the hill. A ground rescue party was sent on the 25th November 1963, headed by an experienced mountaineer of the Army. The party established a camp just below the snow-line on the 25th November 1963 and reached the site of the wreckage at 4.30 p.m. on 26th November 1963. The snow being soft,