

After days of denial, Iran admits it shot down Ukrainian aircraft

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The jetliner, a Boeing 737, went down on the outskirts of Tehran shortly after taking off from Imam Khomeini International Airport for the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv.

General view of the debris of the Ukraine International Airlines, flight PS752, Boeing 737-800 plane that crashed after take-off from Iran's Imam Khomeini airport, on the outskirts of Tehran (Screen grab via REUTERS)

Tehran: Iran Saturday acknowledged that it shot down the Ukrainian jetliner that crashed on Wednesday, killing all 176 people aboard, in a "catastrophic mistake", after the government had repeatedly denied mounting evidence that it was responsible.

The plane was shot down early Wednesday, hours after Iran launched a ballistic missile attack on two military bases housing US troops in Iraq in retaliation for the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in an American airstrike.

The rare admission by Iran's Revolutionary Guards raised a host of new questions, such as why the country did not shut down its international airport or airspace when it was bracing for a US reprisal. It also undermined the credibility of information provided by senior officials, who for three days adamantly dismissed allegations of a missile strike as Western propaganda.

A top Revolutionary Guards commander said on Saturday that he had told authorities about the unintentional missile strike on Wednesday itself. Iran's acknowledgment alters the narrative around its confrontation with the US in a way that could anger the Iranian public. Iran had promised harsh revenge after Soleimani's death, but instead of killing American soldiers, its forces downed a civilian plane in which most passengers were Iranian and none survived.

In Twitter messages, angry Iranians asked why the plane was allowed to take off with tensions in Iran so high.

A group of Iranian protesters demanded Supreme Leader Ayotallah Ali Khamenei step down. "Commander-in-chief resign, resign," videos on Twitter showed hundreds of people chanting, in front of Tehran's Amir Kabir university, a Reuters report said, adding it could not verify the footage.

Rescue workers at the site of the Ukraine International Airlines crash on the outskirts of Tehran (File/Arash Khamooshi/The New York Times)

General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the aerospace division of the Revolutionary Guards, said his unit accepts full responsibility for the shootdown, while adding that he raised the possibility to his superiors as early as Wednesday morning.

In an address broadcast by state TV, Hajizadeh said when he learned about the downing of the plane, "I wished I was dead."

Hajizadeh claimed that with Guard forces beefing up their air defences fearing that the US would retaliate, he had suggested that Tehran close its airspace, but no action was taken. He added that the airline's pilot and crew had

done nothing wrong, but an officer made "the bad decision" to open fire on the plane after mistaking it for a cruise missile.

Khamenei, who was silent on the crash till Saturday, expressed his "deep sympathy" to the families of the victims and called on the armed forces to "pursue probable shortcomings and guilt in the painful incident".

President Hassan Rouhani acknowledged Iran's responsibility but blamed the downing of the plane in part on "threats and bullying" by the US after the killing of Soleimani. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also deflected some of the blame, tweeting that "human error at time of crisis caused by US adventurism led to disaster".

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said the investigations should continue and the perpetrators brought to justice. He also asked Iran to compensate victims' families, and requested official apologies through diplomatic channels.

Earlier, Iranians had rallied around their leaders after the killing of Qassem Soleimani, attending funeral processions across the country in a show of support for the Islamic Republic. The shootdown of the plane and the lack of transparency around it, along with the restrained response to the killing of Soleimani, could reignite anger at the country's leadership.

The jetliner, a Boeing 737, went down on the outskirts of Tehran shortly after taking off from Imam Khomeini International Airport for the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. It had 167 passengers and nine crew members on board, including 82 Iranians, 57 Canadians, including many Iranians with dual citizenship, and 11 Ukrainians.

The US and Canada, citing intelligence, said they believed Iran shot down the aircraft with a surface-to-air missile. But till Friday, Ali Abedzadeh, the head of the national aviation department, told reporters "with certainty" that a missile had not caused the crash.

Experts said mounting international scrutiny would have made it all but impossible to hide signs of a missile strike in any investigation and Iran may have felt a U-turn was better than battling rising criticism abroad and growing anger at home, as many victims were Iranians with dual nationality.

The disaster echoed a 1988 incident, when a US warship had shot down an Iranian airliner, killing 290 people. Washington said it was an accident. Tehran said it was intentional.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country would remain focused on getting justice, closure, accountability and transparency for the families.

A senior Trump administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said, "Iran's reckless actions have again had devastating consequences".

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, however, said Iran's admission was "an important first step" and that it was "vital that all leaders now pursue a diplomatic way forward" to avoid conflict. The European Union said measures needed to be taken "to ensure that such a horrible accident can never occur again".

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