

SATURDAY NATION

SATURDAY
May 16, 2009

NEWS

How Kenya's police boss escaped death



Police Commissioner Maj-Gen Hussein Ali (left), Rift Valley PC Hassan Noor Hassan and assistant minister Orwa Ojodeh walk away from the scene of the accident on Monday. Photo/JARED NYATAYA

By TOM MATOKE and BARNABAS BIIPosted Monday, May 11 2009 at 21:18

IN SUMMARY

- 'It is through God's grace and professionalism by the pilot that we survived the crash... We were lucky that the plane did not explode on impact'

A split second decision by the pilot of a police helicopter to crash-land on buildings saved a high-powered team of top government officials, including Police Commissioner Hussein Ali and assistant minister Orwa Ojodeh.

The decision also averted a serious accident that may have killed people in a huge crowd that had just attended a public rally addressed by two Cabinet ministers

in Kipchoge Keino Stadium in Kapsabet town.

When he realised that the helicopter was losing power at a critical stage during lift off, Captain Patrick Mugane considered two quick options: To return to the stadium where a huge crowd had gathered and risk the possibility of crash-landing on people, or crash on buildings.

He chose to land on the buildings in a prison farm and saved all 28 people on board and the huge crowd on the ground, which included Cabinet ministers George Saitoti and Chris Obure, among other dignitaries.

Had the pilot decided to return to the stadium the plane would have taken a few more seconds to reach the destination.

“The plane would not gain height after it lost power due to high density,” explained the co-pilot captain James Mburu from his hospital bed at Kapsabet District Hospital.

He added: “We were only 10 seconds airborne when the plane developed a mechanical problem. This forced the pilot to crash-land, hitting Kenya Power and Lighting Company electric cables,” Captain Mburu added.

The pilot, Captain Mugane, who was praised as a hero by his passengers for saving their lives, said they escaped death by the grace of God.

And Rift Valley PC Noor Hasssan Noor, who was one of the passengers, said: “We were lucky that the plane did not explode on impact. This gave some of us chance to escape while the rest were helped out by members of the public.”

The top security officials were among 28 passengers aboard the police helicopter that had taken the team for the official commissioning of police residential houses by Prof Saitoti and Mr Obure.

Government officials

The two ministers and other government officials from their ministries were waiting to take off in a military chopper when the accident occurred at about 12.45pm.

Some six journalists travelling with the Police Commissioner escaped with injuries.

The plane landed on two houses near a slaughterhouse, some 100 metres from Kipchoge stadium where Prof Saitoti and Mr Obure had addressed a rally.

The tail of the plane was thrown 200 metres away from where the chopper crash-landed on its back.

Among the injured journalists were Yatsin Juma and Orto Sori of NTV, Antony Wanjala (KBC), Mwenda Ngugi (KTN), Karuri Nyaga (Citizen) and Kevin Kioko (Office of the President).

Mr Juma survived a bombing in Baidoa, Somalia, in January 2007 while on assignment. He spent months in hospital.

Those that were seriously injured included assistant commissioner of police Mark Opiyo and 14 others who were taken to Eldoret’s Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital after receiving first aid at the Kapsabet District Hospital.

“The condition of four senior government officials appeared serious while 20 others sustained cuts and bruises,” Prof Saitoti said.

“We thank God that there were no deaths and arrangements have been made to transfer the injured for specialised treatment in hospitals in Eldoret and Nairobi,” Prof Saitoti said at Kapsabet hospital where he visited the victims minutes after they were admitted.

A medic at Kapsabet district hospital, Dr Daniel Kemboi, said most of the injured were out of danger adding that those airlifted to Moi Hospital in Eldoret were in stable condition.

Dr Kemboi said a total of 23 people were received at the hospital, including Maj Gen Ali and the Internal Security assistant minister, Mr Ojode, both of who escaped unhurt.

“It is through the professionalism of the pilot that we survived death,” Mr Ojode said.

He said the ill-fated plane had recently undergone refurbishment and had been fitted with new engines.

“The pilot made several attempts to avoid hitting the big crowd that had turned up for the rally. It is through God’s grace that nobody (in the crowd) was injured,” Mr Ojode added.

The MI-17 helicopter was acquired by the government in 1998. The Russian-built helicopter is similar to the one which crash-landed in Athi River in 2004 while carrying then Vice-President Moody Awori to Nairobi from the Coast.

Since the four MI-17 helicopters were acquired by President Daniel arap Moi’s government 11 years ago, a trail of controversy has followed the machines which were bought at a cost of about Sh4.2 billion.

Before yesterday’s accident, the top security officials had witnessed the hand-over of police stations built in areas that were worst affected by last year’s post-election violence in which 1,133 people died and 650,000 displaced.

News of the crash rekindled memories of the 2006 crash in which a top team of government officials were killed when their Kenya Air Force plane crashed onto a mountain while approaching Marsabit airstrip. They were on a peace mission to the area which had been rocked by communal violence.

Recently, a Air Force helicopter carrying President Kibaki was forced to crash-land in Nyamira district after it developed mechanical problems on take-off. The President and his entourage escaped unhurt.

Monday’s accident occurred as the team was taking off to Eldama Ravine in Koibatek District to open more police stations.

Mr Ojode, who spoke after being examined and discharged, said the plane developed mechanical problems moments after take-off.

He said investigations into the cause of the mishap will be carried out adding that the plane was serviced recently.

He said the government would acquire three new police choppers if allocated sufficient funds this financial year.