

Top general killed in helicopter crash

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A UH-60M Black Hawk helicopter takes off at Taipei International Airport (Songshan airport) yesterday.

Photo: Peter Lo, Taipei Times

A military helicopter crashed yesterday morning, killing eight of 13 military personnel onboard, including Chief of the General Staff General Shen Yi-ming (申宜明), the nation's most senior military official ever killed in such an incident, the Ministry of National Defense said.

At a news conference at Songshan Air Force Base in Taipei at 1:55pm, Air Force Commander General Hsiung Hou-chi (熊侯奇) confirmed that a UH-60M Black Hawk crashed and only five of those onboard had survived.

The other fatalities included Political Warfare Bureau Deputy Director Major General Yu Chin-wen (俞欽文), Intelligence Staff Office Deputy Assistant Major General Hung Hung-chun (洪洪春), senior enlisted adviser Major Han Cheng-hung (韓成宏) and Major Huang Sheng-hang (黃勝航), a general staff officer, he said.

The helicopter's pilot, Colonel Yeh Chien-yi (葉建益), and copilot, Captain Liu Chen-fu (劉陳富), were also killed, he added.

Shen was leading the group to Dongaoling Base (東岡陵) in Yilan County to oversee New Year-related events for troops stationed in the area, the ministry said, adding that the helicopter left Taipei International Airport (Songshan airport) at 7:50am.

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Final contact with the helicopter was at 8:06am, when Yeh reported that “visibility is normal,” one minute before the aircraft disappeared from radar, the ministry said.

The cause of the crash was unknown and a task force was being assembled for an investigation, Hsiung said.

The Ministry of the Interior announced that it was grounding its fleet of 14 Black Hawks of the same model for safety inspections, saying that while the aircraft and their crews would be available for search-and-rescue operations, all training missions had been suspended until further notice.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), accompanied by Minister of National Defense Yen De-fa (顏德發) and National Security Council Secretary-General David Lee (李德全), visited the army’s Jinliujie Base (金流基) in Yilan to be briefed on the situation.

Tsai instructed Yen to keep the troops calm and vigilant, as well as to have all military bases nationwide fly the national flag at half-mast for three days of mourning.

The ministry must investigate and discover the cause of the crash, she said, adding that she had already spoken with Shen’s wife by telephone to convey her regret over the incident and condolences on behalf of the state.

The Taiwan Transportation Safety Board said that it would provide any necessary assistance to the military in investigating the cause of the crash.

“We have been informed about the accident and sent our investigators to join efforts at the National Rescue Command Center. As the helicopter was a military aircraft, the board is not obligated to investigate the cause of the accident,” board Executive Director Michael Guan (管中闵) said.

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However, as it is the only agency equipped with the hardware to decode data from the helicopter's flight data and cockpit voice recorder, the board would offer its assistance if the ministry requests it, Guan said, adding that it has signed a letter of intent with the ministry detailing cooperation.

The crash was the second incident in the nation involving a Black Hawk.

On Feb. 5 last year, the National Airborne Service Corp dispatched a Black Hawk to transport a patient from Orchid Island (Lanyu, 蘭嶼) to Taitung County, but the aircraft crashed into the sea about 81 seconds after taking off from Lanyu.

All six people aboard were killed and four bodies were never recovered.

The board in September last year disclosed the findings of an investigation into the incident, saying that the pilot's lack of training and turbulence contributed to the crash.

Separately yesterday, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) extended its condolences to the bereaved families on behalf of the US, while wishing the survivors a quick and full recovery.

"I was privileged to work closely with General Shen in our joint efforts to strengthen the US-Taiwan security relationship. With his keen insight and good humor, he was a valued leader, colleague and friend. He will be sorely missed," AIT Director Brent Christensen said in a statement.

"The absence of these dear friends and dedicated partners will be felt for many years to come. We hope that our steadfast commitment to supporting Taiwan's security will honor their memory," the statement said, adding that it "stands ready to assist our Taiwan counterparts in the aftermath of this tragedy."

Additional reporting by Aaron Tu, Chiang Chih-hsiung, Shelley Shan and Lin Chia-nan

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