

Greece probes crash that killed witness in Netanyahu trial

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The former Israeli prime minister is on trial for allegedly accepting expensive gifts from wealthy associates, allegations he denies. [File: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters

Athens, September 14 (RHC)-- Greek authorities are investigating the crash of a private plane from Israel that killed a prosecution witness in Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial. Haim Geron, a former senior official at Israel's ministry of communications, and his wife Esther were killed when the single-engine Cessna 182 plane crashed late on Monday off the island of Samos.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs identified the victims, both aged 69, adding that consular officials and the ministry were working with the family to return the bodies. Geron was one of more than 300 witnesses prosecutors listed for Netanyahu's trial on corruption charges.

The former Israeli prime minister is on trial for allegedly accepting expensive gifts from wealthy associates, allegations he denies. Geron had been expected to testify on allegations that Netanyahu negotiated with a telecommunications firm to secure positive coverage in exchange for policies benefitting the company.

Greece's Air Accident Investigation and Aviation Board is investigating the causes of the crash, officials said Tuesday. The single-engine took off from Haifa and crashed near Samos Airport.

"Shortly before landing, communication with the control tower on Samos was lost and the Civil Aviation Authority informed the search and rescue center about the loss of communication," the authority said in a statement. The bodies of the two Israeli occupants were recovered by the Coast Guard several hours later with the help of divers.

Netanyahu, now the opposition leader in Israel's parliament, has denied all accusations and mocked the size of the witness list.

Kondylis, head of the Greek air accident investigation and aviation safety board, on Tuesday said a team of specialists would fly to Samos on Wednesday to inspect the wreckage "A fisherman said ... there was a large explosion, followed by a smaller one," Kondylis told AFP.

"The wreckage will show if that's the case," Kondylis said, adding that the wreckage was approximately 33 metres (108 feet) underwater and two kilometres (1.2 miles) south of the airport. He added that he was "hopeful" there would be more clarity on the causes of the crash over the next two weeks.

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