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Four dead in military helicopter crash claimed by Taliban

KABUL/GHAZNI CITY, Dec 10 (Pajhwok Afghan News): Four people were killed as a Defence Ministry helicopter crashed in the troubled central province of Maidan Wardak a little while before noon, a police chief said on Monday.

Taliban moved swiftly to assert responsibility for shooting down the chopper, claiming more than 20 aboard were killed. The rebels used a newly acquired anti-aircraft weapon to shoot down the military helicopter, a Taliban spokesman said.

But Zabihullah Mujahid, speaking over the telephone to this news agency, did not explain as to when the Taliban received the new anti-aircraft guns and from whom. The Defence Ministry scorned the assertion as baseless, nonetheless.

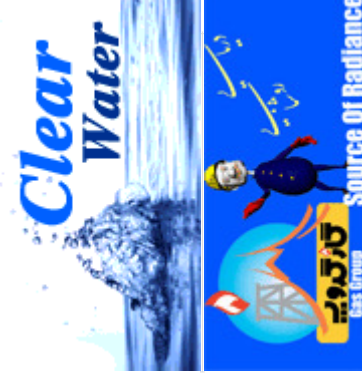
Maidan Wardak police head Gen. Muzaffaruddin, in a chat with Pajhwok Afghan News, linked the crash in the Sultankhel area to bad weather. He said the chopper went down in the Taliban-infested Syedabad district soon after takeoff at 10am.

Following the incident, also confirmed by the Defence Ministry, a rescue team was dispatched to the site, the provincial police head said. The rescuers had hitherto found the bodies of four people, he added.

Muhammad Arif, hailing from the Salar area of the Syedabad district, believed bad weather including a dust-storm in the area could have caused the crash. He saw no signs of hostile fire bringing down the helicopter.

We saw the wreckage scattered around the site. Another helicopter flew in to airlift the four dead bodies, Arif said while giving an eyewitness account of the accident.

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According to a brief press statement from the ministry, the Mi-17 helicopter crashed around 11.30am. All the four people aboard the ill-fated copter flying from Ghazni to Kabul were killed, said an official in Kabul.

Zahir Murad, in charge of the press office at the Defence Ministry, the helicopter had flown supplies to military units in Ghazni

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Reported by Sher Ahmad Haider & Najib Khilwatgar
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