News



People watch a tractor excavate Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET 302 plane crash March 10, 2019, near Bishoftu, Ethiopia. The crash killed 157 people from 35 countries. (CNS/Maheder Haileselassie, Reuters)



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Four Catholic Relief Service staff members on their way to a training session in Nairobi, Kenya, were among the passengers aboard an Ethiopian Airlines flight that crashed moments after takeoff in the east African nation.

The accident March 10 claimed the lives of 157 people on board, many of them from humanitarian agencies.

Others on the jetliner included a Georgetown University law school student who was serving as a campus minister and 19 staff members of U.N. agencies. Two Kenyan religious, Mariannhill Fr. George Kageche Mukua and an unidentified nun, were also among those killed in the crash.

Pope Francis offered prayers for the passengers from 35 countries in a telegram March 11.

"Having learned with sadness of the Ethiopian Airlines plane crash, His Holiness Pope Francis offers prayers for the deceased from various countries and commends their souls to the mercy of almighty God. Pope Francis sends heartfelt condolences to their families, and upon all who mourn this tragic loss he invokes the divine blessings of consolation and strength," said the telegram from Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state.

In a statement March 11, Catholic Relief Services shared the news of the tragedy involving its staffers, all Ethiopian nationals.

The dead include Getnet Alemayehu, Mulusew Alemu, Sintayehu Aymeku and Sara Chalachew. They worked in various administrative positions for Catholic Relief Services.

"Although we are in mourning, we celebrate the lives of these colleagues and the selfless contributions they made to our mission, despite the risks and sacrifices that humanitarian work can often entail," Catholic Relief Services said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with their families and all of those who lost loved one as a result of this tragedy."

Catholic Relief Services is the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency. In Washington, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, expressed sadness at the "deaths of four of our esteemed colleagues."

In a letter to Maronite Bishop Gregory Mansour, chairman of the board of Catholic Relief Services, the cardinal said he had asked all bishops in the U.S. to pray for the repose of the souls of the four workers.

"May the consolation of the Savior's embrace be now a source of comfort to their loved ones and co-workers on this difficult and painful day," DiNardo wrote March 11.

Cedric Asiavugwa, a third-year law student at Georgetown University and campus minister, was among the passengers. A letter sent to the Georgetown community late March 10 said he was on his way home to Nairobi because of the death of his fiancee's mother.

"With his passing, the Georgetown family has lost a stellar student, a great friend to many, and a dedicated champion for social justice across East Africa and the world," said the letter from Jesuit Fr. Mark Bosco, executive vice president and dean at Georgetown's law school.

Asiavugwa was a residential minister at Georgetown. He had served as assistant director of advancement at St. Aloysius Gonzaga Secondary School, a free high school for orphans with HIV/AIDS in Nairobi, before enrolling at the law school. He also had served refugees and marginalized people Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and Zimbabwe before enrolling at Georgetown, the letter said.

During the current semester at Georgetown, Asiavugwa was enrolled in the Center for Applied Legal Studies clinic, working with refugees seeking asylum in the U.S.

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"Cedric's goal was to return to Kenya after his studies to pursue a career promoting the rights of refugees in East Africa and beyond," Bosco wrote.

The day of the crash, the Ethiopian Catholic bishops also sent condolence and offered prayers "for those who have lost their lives, that they may rest in peace in heaven."

"We ask our Lord to console the hearts of the families of those who died, all the staff of Ethiopian Airlines and the people of Ethiopia," said the bishops' statement, issued in the country's Amharic language.

"We particularly pray for the staff of Ethiopian Airlines, so that the Holy Spirit may grant them the strength to continue their well-praised services to all the clients of Ethiopian Airlines," the bishops said.

David Beasley, World Food Program executive director, mourned the loss of his agency's seven staffers in a March 10 statement.

"As we mourn, let us reflect that each of these WFP colleagues were willing to travel and work far from their homes and loved ones to help make the world a better place to live. That was their calling, as it is for the rest of the WFP family," he said.

A list of the dead released by Ethiopian Airlines included 32 Kenyans, 18 Canadians, eight from the United States and others from China, India, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Somalia.

Aviation officials from Ethiopia were investigating the accident, the second in recent months involving the brand-new Boeing 737 Max jet. In October, a Lyon Air flight killed 189 people in Indonesia.

The plane has been the workhorse for airlines worldwide and has been the company's best-selling aircraft. China and Ethiopia grounded all flights involving the modern airliner March 11.

Four investigators from the U.S. National Transportation Security Board were dispatched to Ethiopia to assist in the investigation, a board spokesman said March 10.

Addis Ababa and Nairobi are major hubs among worldwide agencies serving poor and marginalized people, refugees and migrants.