Wind Shear Alerts Were Issued

KENNER, La. (AP) — Cockpit recordings from a Pan Am jet may show whether the crew heard control tower reports of potentially dangerous wind currents before the plane took off in a thunderstorm and crashed minutes later, investigators say.

The National Transportation Safety Board said two wind shear alerts were issued about a minute apart, 7½ minutes before Flight 759 crashed after takeoff Friday just outside New Orleans, killing all 145 people aboard and eight on the ground.

But the board refused Sunday to speculate whether wind shears — unpredictable downward bursts of wind that disrupt normal air currents — caused the nation's second-worst plane crash.

Jefferson Parish Coroner Dr. Charles Odom said the identification of the dead should be nearly finished today, and the bodies released to relatives.

The victims, laid out in refrigerator trucks in a huge Delta Air Lines hangar at Moisant Airport, were examined by a team of pathologists, medical experts and the FBI's identification unit.

"There probably will be some that will be almost impossible to identify, but once the fingerprints are in, indications are 90 percent will be identified," Odom said.

The flight of the Boeing 727 originated in Miami and was headed for Las Vegas, Nev., and San Diego.

NTSB spokeswoman Barbara Dixon said it was possible the crew never heard the wind shear alerts. The pilot could have switched radio frequencies from ground control, which governs taxiing planes, to local control, which instructs takeoffs and landings, she said.

But the presence of wind shear alone does not warrant cancellation of a flight, said NTSB vice chairwoman Patricia Goldman.

"Wind shear is but one of the pieces of information" the pilot uses in deciding whether to fly, she said.

Mrs. Goldman said when wind shears occur, "what happens is you get a change in wind direction and velocity which can create turbulence."

Investigators will learn more when the "black box" cockpit voice recording is processed by an FBI lab, she said, adding that it would be about six months before the board issues its report on the apparent cause of the crash.

The recorder's container was damaged by fire after the crash. The tape was not affected, but it contains background noise, such as sounds of the plane's windshield wipers, and the quality is poor, Mrs. Goldman said.

Investigators plan to use sophisticated recording equipment to try to eliminate the background noise.

"It will take longer than we anticipated" to interpret information from the voice recorder and the other tape in the flight data recorder, said Carol Roberts, chief of the safety board's lab service division.

She said weather would be looked at as a potential cause of the crash, adding, "We're not ruling anything out."

The co-pilot, Donald Pierce, 32, of Miami, apparently was at the controls during takeoff, Mrs. Goldman said. He had logged more than 6,000 hours of flight time.

One of the injured survivors, 7-year-old Rachel Schultz, was transferred Sunday in critical condition to the Shriners Burn Institute in Galveston, Texas.

Her mother, Barbara Schultz, remained in critical condition at East Jefferson Hospital with burns over 80 percent of her body. Mrs. Schultz' 11-year-old daughter, Jennifer, was killed.

In the Morningside subdivision, where the plane devastated 11 houses along a quarter-mile strip, the process of demolition continued.

City housing inspectors condemned the structures, and bulldozers on Sunday scraped up a block of former houses into a pile of rubble up to 15 feet high. The wreckage is to be trucked to the city dump.

Concrete slabs where four houses once stood were covered by cakes of black mud, loose wires, scraps of wood and other debris.

For the third straight night, police cordoned off the streets for five square blocks and turned on searchlights. Gov. Dave Treen called out the National Guard to help the efforts. Several people have been arrested for trespassing in the crash area.

Searchers found $35,000 in cash and checks on one of the bodies, and smaller amounts on two others, deputies said. Many of the victims had been bound for the gambling mecca of Las Vegas.

"The cleanup process begins now," said Kenner Police Chief Salvador Lentini.

"That's why we're anxious to get the wreckage out of here, so people can go back to living a normal life."

But he added: "There will always be a scar there..."

Archbishop Phillip Hannan of New Orleans held a funeral mass Sunday at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the parish church for the people on the ground who died.