

One dead, one missing in Black Hawk crash off Fiji

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) says at least one Army personnel member has died in a Black Hawk helicopter crash near Fiji.

Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, says the helicopter was involved in an accident while operating off HMAS *Kanimbla*.

He says the helicopter was attempting to land on the *Kanimbla* when something happened and the Black Hawk went over the side and into the sea.

Ten personnel were on board the helicopter at the time; one is still missing, and one died of his injuries after the crash.

Air Chief Marshal Houston says the other eight crew members were rescued, and seven of those are injured.

"Their injuries were not of a serious nature," he said.

He still hopes the missing soldier can be found tonight.

"Recovery operations are continuing," he said.

"HMAS *Newcastle*, operating with HMAS *Kanimbla*, is continuing to search the area for the missing person."

Air Chief Marshal Houston says the ADF is in the process of informing the families of those involved.

He says the ADF will search for the missing crew member "until all hope is lost".

He also says the helicopter went down in water 2,000 to 3,000 metres deep, and he does not expect it will ever be recovered.

Operation to continue

Defence Minister Brendan Nelson has sent his sympathies to those involved in the crash and their families.

"The hearts of every Australian will go out to these families and these service men and women who have been affected by this," he said.

"As the CDF [Chief of the Defence Force] said, the investigations into the incident will continue, the operation will also continue.

"It is extremely important that we have our naval vessels, our defence men and women on stand-by, should Australians need it."

The *Kanimbla* is one of three ships sent to the region early this month in case of a coup in Fiji.

The navy ships were to be used to evacuate any Australians from the island.

In 1996, 18 soldiers were killed when two Black Hawks collided near Townsville and last year nine members of the Defence Force died when a navy Sea King helicopter crashed on the Island of Nias.

Six Army personnel were injured in February 2004, when their Black Hawk crashed during an exercise in south-east Queensland.

DFAT advisory

In a separate development, the Federal Government has authorised the voluntary departure of the families of High Commission staff from Fiji, following the announcement of a military exercise to be held in the country's capital.

The Department of Foreign Affairs has revised its travel advice to the country, urging a reconsideration of travel to the country.

It says the security situation in the country is volatile and could deteriorate without warning.

The Fijian military says it will conduct an exercise in Suva, beginning at midnight until 3:00am (local time) and will involve the firing of illumination rounds into the sea near Nukulau, Makuluva and the entrance to Suva Harbour.

Due to the continuing political tensions and threats of a military coup, people are warned to avoid public gatherings and Government buildings.