

Iran's President Raisi declared dead in helicopter crash

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Online Desk :

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was declared dead on Monday after rescue teams found his crashed helicopter in a fog-shrouded western mountain region, sparking mourning in the Islamic republic. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has ultimate authority in Iran, declared five days of mourning and assigned vice president Mohammad Mokhber, 68, to assume interim duties ahead of elections within 50 days. Earlier Monday, state TV announced that “the servant of the Iranian nation, Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi, has achieved the highest level of martyrdom” and broadcast pictures from Raisi’s life as a voice recited the Koran.

The ultraconservative Raisi, 63, had been in office since 2021, during a time that has seen Iran rocked by mass protests, economic crisis deepened by US sanctions, and armed exchanges with arch enemy Israel. Condolences came in from Palestinian militant group Hamas, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and from Syria, all members of the so-called Axis of Resistance against Israel and its allies, at a time of high Middle East tensions over the Gaza war. Khamenei had urged Iranians Sunday, as the search was still ongoing, to “not worry” about the leadership of the Islamic republic, saying “there will be no disruption in the country’s work”. Killed alongside Raisi were Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, known for his fierce anti-Israel sentiment and scepticism of the West, and seven others, including the pilot, bodyguards and political and religious officials.

– Fog and rain –

Iranian authorities first raised the alarm on Sunday afternoon when they lost contact with Raisi’s helicopter as it flew through a fog-shrouded mountain area of the Jolfa region of East Azerbaijan province.

Raisi had earlier met Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev on their common border to inaugurate a dam project.

On the return trip, only two of the three helicopters in his convoy landed in the city of Tabriz, setting off a massive search and rescue effort, with multiple foreign governments soon offering help.

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi at first spoke of a “hard landing” and urged citizens to ignore hostile foreign media channels and get their information “only from state television”.

Army personnel, Revolutionary Guard and police officers joined the search as Red Crescent teams walked up a hill in the fog and rain as rows of emergency services vehicles waited nearby.

Muslim faithful across the majority Shiite nation started to pray for those missing, including in mosques in Raisi’s hometown, the Shiite shrine city of Mashhad.

As the sun rose on Monday, rescue crews said they had located the destroyed aircraft with nine people on board.

State television channel IRIB reported online that the helicopter had “hit a mountain and disintegrated” on impact.

Iran's Red Crescent chief Pirhossein Koolivand confirmed that its staff were "transferring the bodies of the martyrs to Tabriz" and that "the search operations have come to an end".

– 'Tireless spirit '-

The cabinet vowed that the government's work will go on "without the slightest disruption" and said that "we assure the loyal nation that the path of service will continue with the tireless spirit of Ayatollah Raisi", using his clerical title. Foreign countries had been closely following the search at a time of high regional tensions over the Gaza war raging between Israel and Hamas since October 7. Expressions of concern and offers of help had quickly come from countries including China, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey, which later offered the condolences.

US President Joe Biden was briefed about the search, an American official said, and the European Union activated its rapid response mapping service to aid in the search effort. Raisi had in 2021 succeeded the moderate Hassan Rouhani, at a time the economy was battered by US sanctions over Iran's contested nuclear programme. Iran saw a wave of protests in 2022 triggered by the death in custody of Iranian-Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini after her arrest for allegedly flouting strict dress rules for women. In March 2023, regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia signed a surprise deal that restored diplomatic relations.

The Gaza war sent tensions soaring and a series of tit-for-tat escalations led to Tehran launching hundreds of missiles and rockets directly at Israel in April this year. In a speech hours before his death, Raisi emphasised Iran's support for the Palestinians, a centrepiece of its foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution. "We believe that Palestine is the first issue of the Muslim world," said Raisi. Hamas expressed its condolences for Raisi, hailing him as an "honourable supporter", while Hezbollah mourned him as "a protector of the resistance movements".