

Ukraine Chief Plays Down Magnitude of Black Sea Crash

Reuters

KIEV — Ukraine inched closer on Wednesday to conceding that one of its missiles might have blown up a Russian airliner, but President Leonid Kuchma stepped into a diplomatic minefield by saying "bigger mistakes have been made."

Mr. Kuchma said he would accept the findings from a Russian investigation into the crash last Thursday. The investigation is still going on, but Russian experts said Tuesday that they had found what appeared to be missile parts among the wreckage of the Tupolev-154.

The Siberia Airlines plane exploded over the Black Sea, killing all 78 on board near where Ukraine was holding live missile exercises. Most of the passengers were Russian-born Israelis flying from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk in Siberia.

Mr. Kuchma sought to play down the magnitude of the error, should the investigation find his military at fault. "We are not the first and will not be the last," he said. "We should not make a tragedy out of matters if it was a mistake. Bigger mistakes have been made."

But Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel, said that country viewed the plane's destruction as a major tragedy.

"When it's not your people that are killed then yes, you can make those academic observations," he said. "But the fact is that 78 people, most of them Israelis, were killed or died, and therefore for us it's a major tragedy."

A spokesman for Mr. Kuchma said the president had meant the accident should not blacken Ukraine's name abroad. "The death of even one

person is a tragedy," he said.

Ukraine's handling of the incident has already led to strains with Russia. The military has consistently denied that one of its missiles went astray during exercises, prompting increasing incredulity from Russian officials.

One investigator said Tuesday that the data provided by Kiev was "unconvincing," echoing comments by President Vladimir Putin that he was unhappy with the information.

Mr. Putin was restrained in an appearance on national television Tuesday night. But his remarks clearly were meant to warn Ukraine's leaders that it was time to end what Russian experts increasingly consider a cover-up of its military's involvement in the crash.

Lieutenant General Volodymyr Tkachyov, the

man in charge of sending volleys of live missiles over the Black Sea last week, flew to the Russian resort of Sochi on Wednesday to help Russian investigators sifting through wreckage hauled from the sea.

Siberia Airlines, which owned the plane, said it would sue Ukraine's armed forces if the investigators' report concluded the military was to blame for the crash, Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

If Ukraine's armed forces are found to have caused the crash, it would be the second time in 18 months that they had lost control of a live missile.

In 2000, four people were killed in their homes in the town of Brovary when a Tochka-U missile ploughed into their apartment block. The Defense Ministry denied responsibility until rescue workers found remnants of the missile among the rubble.