

Cockpit fire forces AirTran flight to make emergency landing in North Carolina

GREENSBORO, North Carolina (CNN) -- A cockpit fire forced an AirTran flight carrying 62 people to make an emergency landing at Piedmont Triad International Airport Tuesday, authorities said.

Four people suffered smoke inhalation and one person sprained an ankle deplaning, an AirTran spokesman said. All were treated at area hospitals and released.

Flight 913 took off at 3:30 p.m., 20 minutes after its scheduled departure for Atlanta. A few minutes later at an altitude of 7,000 feet and 15 miles south of Greensboro, the pilot radioed the airport's tower that the cockpit was filling with smoke, said AirTran spokesman Tad Hutcheson.

The DC-9 was carrying 56 passengers, a crew of five and an AirTran employee in the plane's jump seat.

"He followed standard procedures and made a smooth landing at 3:45 p.m.,"

Hutcheson said. "The crew was in control of the aircraft at all times."

Fire trucks lining the tarmac greeted their arrival, but were not needed.

"Our folks who witnessed the evacuation said that smoke was pouring from the aircraft," said Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman Kathleen Bergen.

Those aboard evacuated the aircraft by stairs and emergency chutes, Hutcheson said.

The plane, tail number 938 and registration N838AT, had undergone a routine maintenance check Monday night. "There was nothing out of the ordinary," Hutcheson said.

The National Transportation Safety Board is scheduled to arrive Wednesday morning to investigate.

AirTran's Hutcheson said the pilot said he had seen smoke but no flames.

But FAA's Bergen said a preliminary investigation by the agency suggested that the damage to the cockpit indicated there had been flames.

The passengers were put on another airline for the trip to Atlanta.

The Orlando, Florida-based airline was rechristened AirTran after a ValuJet plane crashed in the Everglades in May 1996, killing 110 people. A repair company hired by ValuJet was convicted of improperly handling hazardous waste in that crash.

The only cargo the plane was carrying Tuesday was passengers' luggage and 50 pounds of U.S. mail, Hutcheson said. "We don't carry hazardous cargo," he said.