

Brazil, Argentina Faulted on Air Safety

Pilots, Controllers Say Equipment, Staffing Issues Could Be Putting Passengers at Risk

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BUENOS AIRES, May 19 -- Pilots and air traffic controllers have warned that shoddy safety systems could be putting passengers at risk in [South America](#)'s two largest countries, prompting an international outcry for rapid overhauls of the organizations that manage air transit in [Argentina](#) and [Brazil](#).

Increased air traffic at major airports in both countries has not resulted in corresponding upgrades of infrastructure or additional staffing, according to organizations representing thousands of pilots and air traffic controllers worldwide. The result, they say, is confusion above some of the region's most visited cities.

In [Buenos Aires](#), for example, the only certified, long-range radar in Argentina was struck by lightning March 1 and has not been replaced, forcing air traffic controllers to manually guide aircraft -- a task some controllers say they have not been adequately trained to handle. Five "near misses" have occurred since the radar outage, according to Argentina's Airline Pilots Association.

Brazil's air traffic systems have been under scrutiny since a commercial airliner collided with a private plane over the Amazon rain forest last fall, killing all 154 aboard the airliner. Earlier this year, the Washington-based International Airline Pilots Association cautioned pilots to take special care when flying in Brazil, citing a "lack of proper governmental oversight and control" of air traffic. Since then, Brazil's air traffic controllers have instituted several work slowdowns to protest staffing shortages in a country where domestic air traffic has increased by 49 percent in the past five years, according to the country's airport authority.

The tone of the recent flurry of warnings by aviation groups has been unusually strident, according to air safety experts.

"I cannot recall -- at least in recent memory -- alerts that have been as pointed as the these concerning Argentina and Brazil," said William Voss, president of the [Arlington](#)-based Flight Safety Foundation and former head of navigation safety for the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Argentina's radar problem has provoked the loudest calls for action. Although manually guiding aircraft landings is still standard procedure in many parts of the world -- including large parts of [Russia](#) and [China](#) -- it is less common in major urban centers. It also requires staff to be specially trained and the rate of air traffic to be reduced, said Marc Baumgartner, president of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations.

Asking controllers to abruptly switch from radar-guided direction to manual methods without properly training them is, he said, "like asking the check-in agent to fly the aircraft."

"The controllers are overwhelmed by the task," said Baumgartner, who is based in [Geneva](#). "What they are doing is asking aircraft to turn 100 miles before the landing and wait there at altitudes of 10 kilometers [6.2 miles], which is absolutely unknown in aviation. If it continues like this, we fear there will be a serious accident."

Argentina's Ministry of Defense, which oversees all air traffic control, continues to play down such fears. Defense Minister Nilda Garré said Thursday that [Spain](#) plans to lend a radar system to Argentina until it installs a permanent replacement later this year.

The government has also questioned whether some of the five close calls reported by local pilots in the past two months actually happened. One union representing pilots from the Argentine airline Austral also has suggested that some of the incidents had been exaggerated and that the planes were not close to colliding.

Those denials infuriate Enrique Piñeyro, whose 2006 documentary, "Air Force, Incorporated," detailed numerous flaws in Argentina's air traffic control system. One day after the documentary hit theaters here, President Néstor Kirchner announced that he would replace military oversight of air traffic with civilian control. The switchover still hasn't happened, though officials promise it will in the coming months.

"The Ministry of Defense says everything is fine, but, in reality, it's all in a state of collapse," said Piñeyro, a former pilot who has worked with controllers in Argentina to document the recent close calls. "The government's response is psychotic -- they say the near misses didn't happen. But we have clear evidence -- we have the recordings that prove it. They are just issuing flat denials without any evidence."

Brazil's air traffic control system also remains in military hands, though some critics are demanding a switch to civilian control, and Congress this week began selecting members for a panel that will investigate the country's aviation sector.

According to air traffic controllers unions in Brazil, the military has not responded quickly enough to make infrastructure improvements. Brasilia's airport has been closed twice in recent months because of radio failure, and [Sao Paulo's](#) Congonhas airport -- the busiest domestic airport in the country -- has closed an average of three times a month since December, mostly because of heavy rains. Earlier this year, prosecutors tried to close the main runway there, saying it was unsafe during wet weather and needed immediate improvements.

The Brazilian government has promised a cash infusion aimed at expanding airport capacity and has announced it will hire more than 400 air traffic controllers by the end of the year.

But Jorge Nunes Oliveira, president of the Association of Air Traffic Controllers of [Rio de Janeiro](#), said this week that twice that many controllers need to be added to the 2,000 to 2,500 that are currently employed nationwide.

"We are still working with some obsolete equipment, and we don't have the number of professionals we need," Oliveira said. "We have four control centers around Brazil that are responsible for the whole country. They should launch a deep study of that and consider sub-dividing those."

He added: "I always used to say that, despite everything, Brazil's air traffic was safe. But I don't think that anymore."

Even so, pilots organizations have not gone so far as to discourage their members from flying in both countries.

Jorge Pérez Tamayo, a pilot for Aerolineas Argentina and president of the country's Airline Pilots Association, said that pilots have been extra vigilant in recent months to try to make up for "a serious lack of investment by the government."

"The day we see that we have crossed the line and it is no longer safe, that is the day that no pilot will fly in Argentina," he said.