

Brazil Demands Solution to Aviation Crisis

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SÃO PAULO, [Brazil](#), July 18 — With the death toll climbing after the fiery crash of a crowded [Airbus](#) here on Tuesday night, Brazilians responded Wednesday with anger and renewed calls for the government to act immediately to end the deepening aviation crisis that has tormented the country for nearly a year.

More than 176 people are confirmed dead in the accident, the worst in Brazil's history and the second in less than 10 months. But even as Brazilians mourned, the focus of their discussion was shifting to how to prevent yet another disaster.

Since a midair collision over the Amazon on Sept. 29, 2006, in which 154 people were killed, flying in Brazil has become increasingly difficult and fraught with uncertainty. Flight controllers, afraid of being made scapegoats for the chaos, have rebelled against military control, other near-collisions have been recorded, radar and other tracking systems have shown signs of breaking down, and, as a result, hundreds of flights have been delayed or canceled.

Though President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) has created an emergency cabinet group to deal with Tuesday night's disaster, it is not clear who is dealing with the larger array of problems. The Air Force Ministry and a pair of civilian government agencies that deal with aviation have sought to minimize their responsibility for the situation and, in the opinion of aviation experts, transfer blame to the others.

“So far, the government has not been able even to command and put in order its own agencies that deal with civil aviation,” said Jorge Carlos Botelho, president of a national airline workers union. “If those federal agencies don't know how to act and what are the measures that need to be taken, then the highest levels of government, the president himself, needs to take a position and take charge of this.”

Among the dead in the crash on Tuesday was Julio Redecker, the minority leader of the lower house of the Brazilian Congress, who was on his way to a parliamentary conference in the United States. Opposition leaders have for months been attacking what they say is the da Silva government's inept handling of the aviation crisis — most notably Minister of Tourism Marta Suplicy's recent remark that passengers should “relax and enjoy” the delays they encounter — and the death of one of their own intensified their criticisms.

Mr. da Silva “needs to act and not talk,” said Senator Arturo Virgilio, the minority leader. “For me, enough already! Brazil is despondent, too!”

Theories about the cause of the crash focused on conditions at the Congonhas Airport here, which is Brazil's busiest, handling more than 600 landings and takeoffs on an average day. Experts said that even in the best of circumstances, the airport, in the heart of one of the world's biggest urban concentrations, with a runway that is barely a mile long, challenges pilots. The plane skidded off the runway on Tuesday night.

“The Congonhas runway is almost that of an aircraft carrier, with little margin for error,” said Carlos Ari Germano, a retired pilot, airline security consultant and author. “This is an antiquated airport, built in 1936 when the city of São Paulo was far away.” He added, “If this accident had occurred at an airport with a larger area for maneuver, it may not have had the tragic consequences that it did.”

Brazilian news organizations were speculating that the pilot of the plane that crashed, TAM Flight JJ 3054, may have touched down beyond the limit of the zone designated for landings. At a sometimes testy news conference here on Wednesday with representatives of all three government agencies involved in aviation matters, officials said it appeared that the plane had touched down very close to that safety point, but within acceptable limits.

On a normal day, a pilot might have been able to recover from any such miscalculation. But the weather here has been quite rainy, and Congonhas is known to have runways that are chronically slippery

when wet and have led to several incidents of skidding and shutdowns that have caused nationwide air traffic snarls.

Numerous pilots and airline groups came forward Wednesday to say that they had repeatedly warned aviation authorities that the skidding was worsening with wear and tear on the main runway. Repairs were ordered, but the runway was put back in use last month before the crucial last stage, known as “grooving,” aviation officials acknowledged Wednesday. The grooves were to be installed next month after the winter vacation season in the Southern Hemisphere and the Pan-American Games in Rio de Janeiro.

“Grooving” provides drainage and lets tires get a better grip when a plane lands, aviation experts said.

But at a somber news conference here on Wednesday, the president of TAM, Marco Antonio Bologna, ruled out the idea that a wet runway was the principal cause of the crash.

At another news conference, Senator Demóstenes Torres, chairman of a congressional committee investigating what is known here as the “aviation blackout,” noted that the number of passengers is growing by 12 percent a year, while airport capacity and the number of flight controllers have remained virtually stagnant.