

Thousands visit Brazil plane crash site

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SAO PAULO, Brazil --

Brazilians by the thousands traveled Sunday to the site of the recent plane crash that killed 191 people, staring at the charred remnants of a gutted air cargo building, praying, and protesting the failures of their country's air safety system.

As jetliners roared overhead, some placed flowers on a fence above the highway that TAM airlines flight 3054 sped over Tuesday before hitting the building and a gas station. A shattered concrete curb marked the spot where the Airbus A320 briefly went airborne after landing on a rain-slicked runway widely criticized as too short.

It was the deadliest crash in the nation's history - all 187 people aboard and at least four on the ground died. And it focused anger at the government's inability to fix an aviation system that in the past year has also suffered strikes, radar failures, and delays.

Juan Pedro Medeiros and Leticia Volasco held a sign with just one word: "Basta" - enough. The two did not know anyone on the plane, but decided during breakfast that they had to protest over the air safety problems.

"It's time to say we've had enough of this," said Volasco, a 38-year-old lawyer. "We're just tired of the impunity. We want to know who caused this and why and have them punished."

Though the Congonhas airport runway has been widely criticized, government officials insist it was not to blame. The plane's right reverse thruster was also deactivated, but TAM said that was not a safety threat. An investigation into the crash could take months.

Only after the Sao Paulo crash, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Congonhas is used beyond capacity and that South America's largest city needs a third airport.

Graffiti on a wall just beneath the runway's edge said "Brazil is in mourning. Close Congonhas!" And on highway overpasses throughout the city, banners read, "Justice for the Flight 3054 Crime!"

Earlier Sunday, more than 2,000 people packed Sao Paulo's cathedral in a mass for the dead. Relatives came wearing white T-shirts with pictures of the victims, sobbing and holding each other.

Marcelo Gomes tried to console his sister, whose daughters, ages 14 and 10, both died.

"It's disgusting," he said. "My sister lost two children because of problems the government has known about for ages. It's an old airport with a short runway."

After the mass, dozens of relatives walked to the crash site, reciting "Hail Mary" as dust from the rubble swirled in the air. Then, as some cried, they lay down on the asphalt of the highway the plane roared over less than a second before it blew apart.

As bystanders watched, the group lay as if they too were dead, and a few hung a banner warning that similar crashes could easily happen again in Brazil.

"How many more people must die before someone takes action?" it read. "Less speeches, and more action!"