

Sao Paulo's growth overwhelms airport

Sao Paulo's incredible development has taken a toll on its airports and infrastructure, increasing the risk of accidents like last week's deadly crash.

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RIO DE JANEIRO --

When Lygia Horta first moved to the city of Sao Paulo more than five decades ago, the roads were still unpaved, water came from local wells, and nearby Congonhas airport served only sporadic flights by a now-defunct airline.

The city has since mushroomed around Horta and become South America's biggest metropolis, while Congonhas has swollen into the continent's busiest airport, with as many as 44 planes taking off or landing every hour.

Aviation experts say that kind of meteoric growth has overwhelmed airports and other infrastructure around Brazil and South America while upping the risk of accidents such as Tuesday's crash of an Airbus 320 at Congonhas, which claimed the lives of at least 191, including two employees of Banco Santander in Miami. It was Brazil's deadliest air accident.

Horta said it was clear before Tuesday's incident that the 71-year-old airport near her house was being used far past capacity. She's president of a residents association that has tried for years to limit the airport's use.

"It's still the same airport that they built in 1936, except it's surrounded by city and buildings now and these jets don't stop flying," Horta said. "Times have changed, but the airport hasn't."

The plane operated by the Brazilian airline TAM skidded off the airport's rain-slicked runway Tuesday night while landing, overshot the airfield and slammed into a nearby gas station and cargo terminal run by the same airline, exploding on impact.

ERROR BY OFFICIALS?

Many are asking whether airport officials erred in reopening the airport's repaved main runway last month, since it was known to flood during rains, before horizontal grooving that could channel off water was completed. Critics say airline officials pressured the airport to quickly reopen the runway to meet heavy demand.

Such questionable decisions are being made more frequently as aviation officials in Brazil struggle to fit growing air traffic into outdated infrastructure, said federal prosecutor Marcio Schusterschitz. He asked a judge to close Congonhas airport until investigations into Tuesday's crash are completed.

"We're feeling the stress throughout our aviation system, and the result may be more accidents," Schusterschitz said. "At Congonhas, we have one plane on top of another, and while we've built luxurious passenger terminals, the runway has been ignored."

The number of planes using Congonhas grew by 8 percent between April 2006 and this April, with more than 17 million passengers passing through the airport each year, reports the Latin American Association of Air Transport.

The growth has been even more dramatic at Sao Paulo's international airport in Guarulhos, where flight traffic jumped by 39 percent during the same period. Flight traffic around Brazil is growing about 12 percent a year.

While passenger numbers rise, Brazil's government has failed to hire enough flight controllers to meet demand and has aggravated problems by concentrating air traffic around Sao Paulo, Schusterschitz said. Critics say the country's other airports have also been neglected.

As a result, the nation's air traffic system has been in meltdown since last June, when Brazil's former flagship airline Varig went into economic collapse. Although the airline was ultimately bought by former competitor Gol, it has drastically scaled back the number of flights it runs, overloading other airlines.

MORE PROBLEMS

The problems intensified after a mid-air collision last September, in which a Boeing 737 run by Gol and an executive jet flown by U.S. pilots clipped each other over the Amazon rain forest, sending the Boeing plunging. The crash killed 154. Ongoing investigations suggest flight controllers may have placed the two planes at the same altitude at the time of the crash.

Controllers complaining of being overworked have since staged work slowdowns to protest both job conditions and investigations into their role in the crash, sparking widespread flight delays and cancellations.

The country was hit by more bad news over the weekend, when an electrical failure cut radar systems over a swath of the Amazon for more than three hours. More than a dozen flights from the United States and numerous domestic flights were forced to turn around or land elsewhere.

The government of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva responded this week to the crisis by announcing measures to reduce air traffic at Congonhas and build a new airport in Sao Paulo.

In his first speech since the crash, the president admitted Friday that, "Our air system, in spite of the investments that we made in the expansion and modernization of almost all Brazilian airports, is undergoing difficulties."

The problem is regional, as the same mix of rising air traffic and aging infrastructure has taxed air systems in neighboring Argentina, said former Argentine pilot Enrique Pineyro, who has been a leading critic of his country's air traffic system.

Argentine flight controllers had been working without radar control since March 1, when lightning destroyed the country's only certified radar. Although government officials say the radar was repaired and has been operating since July 9, it has since failed at least three times, Pineyro said.

"Although we've had all these problems, nothing has changed," Pineyro said. "I'm afraid they won't change until we have another accident here."