

Brazilian airline cancels flights amid heavy rains

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SAO PAULO --

Citing safety concerns due to heavy rain, TAM airlines canceled or diverted 90 flights Tuesday at Sao Paulo's main airport, where one of the carrier's planes crashed in the rain last week, killing 199 people.

Other airlines continued to fly in and out of Congonhas -- Brazil's busiest airport -- but it was periodically closed and reopened by authorities to all traffic during the rain. Before last week's crash, Congonhas handled about 600 takeoffs and landings a day.

TAM canceled 68 domestic flights from Congonhas, stranding thousands of passengers and diverted 22 other flights to Sao Paulo's international airport. Brazil's biggest airline said it made the decision for passenger safety because of heavy rains that started Monday and were predicted to last through Wednesday.

The main runway at Congonhas, short by modern standards, has been closed since the July 17 crash while aviation officials investigate, leaving Congonhas with only a still-shorter auxiliary runway in use.

Although government officials have insisted that both runways are safe, even when wet, TAM Linhas Aereas SA told its pilots Monday not to land at Congonhas at all during rainy conditions or when there are predictions of rain.

Torrential rains that began Monday ended Tuesday morning, but there were still periods of rain and it was overcast throughout South America's largest city.

TAM Flight 3054 crashed in driving rain after appearing to speed up when it landed, then jumped a highway and hit a gas station and an air cargo building, killing all 187 people aboard and 12 on the ground. The airline said one of the Airbus 320's two thrust reversers was deactivated, although it said that was allowed under government safety regulations.

While some of Tuesday's delayed passengers thought it was better to be safe and not fly, others were outraged that Brazil seems to be entering a domestic flight air crisis with no end in sight.

"This is a joke," said José Tereza, a 52-year-old doctor whose flight Monday was canceled because of rain. He then spent 16 hours in the airport only to see the flight canceled again Tuesday morning.

"Now I'm going to have to take a six-hour bus ride, but I'm hearing the buses are packed because of this," he said.

Tereza, like many critics, blamed the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva for failing to invest enough in airport infrastructure in the past five years while the number of flights and passengers has increased dramatically.

A two-hour radar outage of the Amazon early Saturday added to the woes of a system already reeling from the crash in Sao Paulo. It forced the diversion, delay or cancellation of international flights to and from Brazil -- the first time that international flights were severely affected in Brazil's yearlong air transport crisis.

The air force blamed the outage on an electrical failure and said it is investigating whether sabotage was to blame.

Silva has criticized speculation about the cause of the crash until the flight recorders from the Airbus 320 are analyzed by U.S. authorities. That process is now under way, and could last days or weeks.

Government officials insist Congonhas' main runway will be safe when it reopens, even though it won't have grooving to help water runoff and improve planes' grip on the tarmac until September. The backup runway now being used is already grooved, and TAM said it won't use the main runway until the grooving is completed.

Monday's rain loosened dirt from the start of the runway, causing a mudslide that overflowed a containment wall and blocked a highway loop that provides access to Congonhas.

The mudslide happened because Flight 3054 barreled over part of the airport's drainage system before crashing, weakening the escape route for rain from the runway. Infraero, Brazil's aviation authority, said the mudslide did not affect airport operations.