

Head of Brazilian air system replaced

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SAO PAULO, Brazil --

The president of Brazil replaced his defense minister Wednesday after a year of chaos in the military-controlled aviation system, including a jetliner crash that killed nearly 200 people last week.

Defense Minister Waldir Pires came under withering criticism for problems ranging from radar outages to work slowdowns that caused dayslong delays and flight cancellations at Brazilian airports. The outrage mounted after a TAM Linhas Aereas SA jet crashed last week at Sao Paulo's Congonhas airport, killing 199 people. The cause has not yet been determined.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said that Pires would be replaced by former Supreme Court president Nelson Jobim. The presidential office did not say when Pires would leave, or whether he was fired or resigned.

The disruptions ground on as TAM, the nation's No. 1 airline, canceled dozens of flights to and from Congonhas - the country's busiest airport - causing a ripple effect nationwide that stranded thousands and sent tempers flaring.

TAM said it made the decision for passenger safety because of concerns about landing on a short backup runway at Congonhas in heavy rain that started Monday and was predicted to last through Wednesday.

The plane in July 17's fatal accident raced off Congonhas' 6,362-foot main runway, which is short by modern standards, before slamming into a gas station and an air cargo building. Investigators are looking at excess speed, mechanical problems and the runway as possible causes for the crash. Government officials have repeatedly denied the runway played a role.

The main runway has been closed while the crash is investigated, forcing airlines to use a 4,711-foot backup runway that further cuts the safety margin for takeoffs and landings.

TAM said it had canceled 36 flights from Congonhas and diverted another 25 domestic flights to Sao Paulo's international airport because of worries the shorter runway was unsafe in the rain.

On Tuesday, the same safety concerns led to 590 flight cancellations and 298 delays at Congonhas, according to Infraero, the national infrastructure agency.

The government has announced it was temporarily halting ticket purchases for flights at Congonhas in an effort to reduce the number of delays and cancellations.

The delays also prompted TAM's main Brazilian competitor, Gol Linhas Aereas Inteligentes SA, to recommend that its clients postpone flying until Monday.

Many passengers at Congonhas said they would try to wait out delays, but others gave up.

"This is a disgrace," said Marcelo Viera, a chemical plant inspector who showed up five hours early for his flight to the northeastern city of Salvador and got stuck at the end of a line of 300 people.

Brazil's air safety system "has been neglected for years, and it's going to take years to fix," he said.

Many critics blame da Silva's administration for failing to invest enough in airports while the number of flights and passengers has increased dramatically.

Major flight delays and cancellations have been escalating since September, when a Gol Boeing 737 collided with an executive jet and crashed in the Amazon rain forest killing 154 people. Four air traffic controllers, as well the executive jet's two American pilots, face criminal charges in connection with that crash.

The Sao Paulo crash last week replaced the Amazon incident as Brazil's deadliest commercial air accident.

TAM shares fell 1 percent Wednesday morning on Brazil's Bovespa stock exchange, adding to a steep drop since the accident. Gol shares were off 1.7 percent, while the Bovespa's main index rose slightly.

Relatives and friends of the victims gathered at Congonhas Tuesday evening for a religious ceremony to honor the dead exactly one week after the plane crashed.

"She died doing what she liked most," Jose Roberto Silva, said of his daughter Madalena, a TAM flight attendant.

Churches in the southern cities of Porto Alegre and Curitiba - the hometowns of many of the dead - also held memorial Masses.