

# Crash plane speed of Brazilian flight puzzles experts

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SAO PAULO, Brazil --

Experts puzzled Thursday over why a jetliner raced down a runway instead of slowing down before it crashed in a fireball that killed 189 people - an accident that set off a fierce debate over whether to close Brazil's busiest airport.

Security video released by the air force showed TAM Flight 3054 speeding down the tarmac more than four times as fast as other planes landing around the same time. That raised the possibility of pilot or mechanical error instead of a slick and short runway widely cited as a likely cause.

The Airbus-320 appeared to lift off again after rolling down the runway at Congonhas airport in a driving rain. It then flew just above cars in rush-hour traffic before slamming into a building Tuesday night, killing all 186 people aboard and at least three people on the ground.

It was Brazil's worst air disaster and the worst anywhere involving an Airbus A-320, according to the aviation analysis Web site [airsafe.com](http://airsafe.com).

Brig. Jose Carlos Pereira, head of the national airport authority, Infraero, said he was perplexed by the video and hoped an analysis of the plane's two flight recorders would explain why the jet went so fast after touching down. The recorders were being sent to the U.S. for study.

"Something went wrong during landing," Pereira said. "For some reason, the plane did not slow down. Something happened and the pilot, for some reason, accelerated the plane."

Brazilian aviation consultant Elias Gedeon said it was too early to blame the pilot.

"The bottom line is we don't know what happened," Gedeon said. "Why was he going so fast? He couldn't stop? Was it the water on the runway? Was it his ability? We don't know."

Congonhas recently repaved the runway to provide better braking in wet conditions. But the new surface hadn't dried enough for the next step: cutting grooves that allow water to run off and give increased grip. Airplanes continued to slide off the runway after the resurfacing.

While experts struggled to figure out what happened, federal prosecutors asked a federal judge to "temporarily paralyze" Congonhas airport - a move that could disrupt air travel in Latin America's largest nation.

Prosecutors said the facility should be closed "until a complete renovation of both of its runways can be completed and there is certainty that they are fully secure for full operation."

Responding to warnings that such a move could create havoc in travel and cause severe financial repercussions for airlines, prosecutor Marcio Schusterschitz said it was better "to choose life over money."

"We think this situation has reached its limit," Schusterschitz said in an interview with The Associated Press. "Unfortunately, the problems with the airport are not old, we are flying blind."

The judge could issue a decision as early as Monday on the fate of Congonhas, which is Sao Paulo's primary airport for flights with Brazil.

Just four miles from the center of Brazil's biggest city and its financial center, Congonhas offers convenience to travelers despite concerns about its location amid densely populated areas and the safety of short runways that end just before a major highway.

"This airport is too convenient not to be used," said Vivianne Santorini, a 57-year-old lawyer waiting to check in for a flight to the central city of Belo Horizonte. "Is it safe? I guess not. But there are also risks driving your car and crossing the street, and everybody continues driving their car and crossing the street."

Henrique Castro de Souza, a civil servant in line for a TAM flight, disagreed. He said he believe the airport should close.

"Whenever lives are at risk and something can be done to reduce that risk, if that means shutting down this airport so be it," he said. "Of course, it's going to create a mess, but you have to choose between messes and life."

Leonardo Mota Netto, chief spokesman for the national airport authority, said closing the airport was not realistic.

Sao Paulo's international airport in the suburb of Guarulhos is 22 miles from the city center, requiring long drives on traffic-clogged streets, and it does not have the capacity to also handle all the flights that pass through Congonhas.

"To close down Congonhas, to do it correctly, would take at least 15 years," Mota said. "That is the time needed to build viable alternatives, new airports, and redirect flights to other airports in the region which will also have to undergo improvements in their infrastructure."

He said about 18 million travelers use Congonhas each year, 6 million more than it was designed to handle after being built in 1936 on what were then Sao Paulo's outskirts.

Mota said that airlines and the public have resisted moves to limit the domestic flights using Congonhas and that Brazil needs more airports, not fewer, as the number of air passengers grows around 16 percent a year.

Aviation officials insist Congonhas' 6,362-foot runway is not too short for safe operations, but pilots have long complained about slippery conditions during rainy weather and say the length allows small margin for error.

In 1996, a TAM Airlines Fokker-100 crashed into nearby houses shortly after takeoff, killing all 96 aboard and six on the ground.

On Thursday, another TAM plane had to pull out of a landing after coming in at an unsafe angle, circled around and landed safely on its second attempt - a fairly routine event at Congonhas.

A day before the crash, two planes skidded off the runway. On March 22, a Boeing 737-400 overshot the runway in a heavy rain, stopping just short of a steep drop.

In February, a federal court briefly banned three types of large jets from using the airport, but was overruled on appeal. Airbus-320s were not covered under the court's ban.

By Thursday, 184 bodies had been retrieved from the crash scene, but forensic examiners had managed to identify only 18 and said it could take a month to identify them all. Firefighters continued to spray water on smoldering buildings wrecked by the jetliner.

The crash came less than a year after Brazil's previous worst air disaster - 154 people killed in the September collision of a Gol airline Boeing 737 with a small jet over the Amazon rainforest.

That accident touched off months of congressional investigations that raised questions about Brazil's underfunded air traffic control system, deficient radar and lack of investment in infrastructure even as the booming economy fuels a surge in air travel.

Finance Minister Guido Mantega said the government has invested heavily in Brazil's air travel infrastructure and plans future investments of \$526 million to meet rising traffic.