

Brazil's air woes turn international

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil --

Just days after Brazil's deadliest plane crash, a radar outage over the Amazon spread the country's aviation crisis overseas and spawned ripple-effect delays at a half-dozen U.S. airports.

On Sunday, North Americans were still feeling the effects of the aviation problems that have been roiling Brazil for nearly a year.

"I'm stuck in Miami until Tuesday night," said Lisa White, a geology professor at San Francisco State University whose Friday flight from Miami to Rio was turned back because of the problems in Brazil.

The radar failure occurred during the wee hours of Saturday morning, peak travel time between Brazil and the United States. For nearly three hours, air traffic controllers closed Brazilian air space, forcing over 20 international flights to be diverted or canceled. Planes had to return to their points of origin or make unscheduled stops at other airports as far flung as San Juan, Puerto Rico and Santiago, Chile.

Two American Airlines planes traveling from Sao Paulo were forced to make unscheduled landings in the jungle city of Manaus and at least four planes were forced to return to Miami. A United Airlines flight from Washington carrying 73 athletes to Rio de Janeiro for the Pan American Games was canceled, forcing the athletes to arrive a day late.

The Air Force blamed the radar outage on electrical failure, but also said it was investigating whether sabotage was to blame. The outage came just hours after President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva went on national television to announce new measures to shore-up Brazil's ailing aviation system.

Brazilians have been suffering through flight delays and cancellations since September, when a Boeing 737 operated by Gol Airlines crashed over the Amazon rain forest, killing all 154 people aboard. Four air traffic controllers, as well as two U.S. pilots aboard an executive jet that clipped the 737, face criminal charges in connection with that crash.

The accident was Brazil's worst air disaster until Tuesday, when an Airbus-320 operated by TAM Airlines slammed into a building just outside at Sao Paulo's Congonhas airport, killing 191 people.

The Gol crash touched off months of delays and canceled flights in Brazil, as air traffic controllers embarked on a series of work slowdowns to protest precarious conditions in the air.

Because Brazil remains one the last countries in Latin America where the military is responsible for civilian flight controllers, striking is paramount to treason. Many in Brazil suspect recent radar outages that have sporadically stalled domestic air travel are actually veiled work stoppages - hence the suspicion of sabotage.

Jorge Botelho, president of the union representing air traffic controllers, played down the idea of sabotage in Saturday's radar problems, saying the government wants to blame controllers to avoid responsibility for systemic air safety problems.

"Every time there's a problem, they're going to accuse the controllers," he told the government-run Agencia Brasil news agency on Sunday.

The agency also reported that 40 percent of Brazil's commercial flights on Sunday were delayed, and 9 percent were canceled. That was a slight improvement from Saturday, when 45 percent were delayed and 11 percent were canceled.

Experts say there is ample reason to believe Saturday's radar outage was simple equipment failure. Congressional hearings after the Gol crash shocked many travelers, revealing Brazil's airports to be seriously underfunded and stretched to the limit.

"There have been warnings, warnings, warnings about the need to do something about the communications systems, about the runways," said Brazilian aviation consultant Elias Gedeon. "The government didn't understand the importance of this. This is very bad for Brazil."

Gedeon says the problems stretch back at least five years. Spending on aviation security has averaged only \$248 million a year since 2003, when Silva took office, about half of what was spent in 2002.

Gedeon says another problem is that the government has doled out top aviation posts to political appointees with little or no expertise.

On Friday night, even Silva admitted there were problems.

"Our aviation system, in spite of the investments we have made in expansion and modernization of almost all Brazilian airports, is passing through difficulties," Silva said.

The short runway at Congonhas where Tuesday's deadly crash occurred had long been flagged by pilots as dangerous, but the airport's convenience factor has made it the country's busiest, with around 600 takeoffs and landings a day.

Brazil recently spent millions to renovate the Congonhas terminal, but tarmac improvements were saved for last and the runway was reopened before the renovation were completed. Missing from the runway were a series of grooves that would have provided incoming airplanes better grip in rainy conditions - an improvement some think could have saved the TAM flight 3054.

On Sunday, friends and relatives of the victims attended a mass at Sao Paulo's Cathedral. Later, about 50 relatives dressed in white T-shirts emblazoned with pictures of the dead approached the crash site holding hands, stopped a few yards away to pray, then stood in silence.

Amaury Guedes, 72-year-old retired flight attendant, summed up the feelings of many.

"It was a tragedy waiting to happen, because the planes kept growing, the wide bodies, and the runways were never extended to handle them," Guedes said outside the Cathedral. "There are just too many passengers and infrastructure hasn't kept up."