

Defense Minister Is Replaced as Brazil's Air Crisis Grows

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RIO DE JANEIRO, July 25 — President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) on Wednesday replaced the country's defense minister, whose duties include oversight of civil aviation. The move came eight days after the deadliest air disaster in Brazilian history.

With the fallout spreading from last week's accident at São Paulo's Congonhas airport, Mr. da Silva said he was replacing Defense Minister Waldir Pires with Nelson Jobim, a highly respected former [Supreme Court](#) president and justice minister. Mr. da Silva said at Mr. Jobim's swearing-in ceremony that Mr. Pires had resigned voluntarily, but a government news release said he had been asked to do so.

"From this moment on, we are going to do what has to be done," the president said at the ceremony. He added, "And spend what has to be spent."

Pressure had been mounting for Mr. da Silva to make changes after a year of chaos in the military-controlled aviation industry, with problems that included strikes of air traffic controllers, daylong delays and flight cancellations. The outrage over Mr. Pires's handling of the situation grew louder after a TAM Airlines [Airbus](#) crashed last week at Congonhas, killing 199 people.

The accident was the second major air disaster in less than 10 months in [Brazil](#). The TAM plane skidded off a short, slippery runway, crashed into an office building and a gas station and exploded. Last September, 154 people were killed in a midair collision between two planes flying over the Amazon. Both accidents are still under investigation.

For Brazil, the latest tragedy has exploded into a full-blown crisis. Brazilian airlines have canceled hundreds of flights, with one, Gol, advising passengers on Wednesday not to fly for the rest of the month. Wal-Mart has advised its 55,000 employees in Brazil to

avoid Congonhas until conditions improve, the newspaper O Globo reported. O Globo also reported that American Airlines was advising its pilots to turn back to their point of origin at the first sign of trouble in Brazil.

The latest accident has led to international criticism of Brazil's flawed aviation system. Last week, the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations said that air safety in Brazil was "currently compromised and is a danger to the traveling public."

That led Gen. José Carlos Pereira, the director of the national airport authority, Infraero, to fire back that Brazil could solve its safety problems without outside intervention. "This crisis is ours," General Pereira said. "The dead are ours."

He added: "Brazil does not need international help. Let them worry about their airspace, and we will worry about ours."

Political analysts called Mr. Jobim's appointment an astute move by Mr. da Silva. A lawyer by training, Mr. Jobim could help navigate legal issues raised by the crash, and he comes from the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, which is allied to Mr. da Silva's Workers Party.

David Fleischer, publisher of the political newsletter Brazil Focus and a professor of political science at National University of Brasília, said Mr. Jobim would try to persuade the military to relinquish some of its authority over the civil aviation system. Brazil is one of the few countries in the hemisphere whose airline industry is administered by the military.

Mr. da Silva, now in his second term in office, had shied away from confrontations with the military.

But in a speech announcing the change on Wednesday, Mr. da Silva said that the Defense Ministry needed to be strengthened and given "sufficient force to do what needs to be done," and that the military should be modernized and better equipped.

Making further changes to the leadership of the aviation industry will not be easy for Mr. da Silva. Milton Zuanazzi, the president of the National Civil Aviation Agency, which regulates air traffic issues such as scheduling and falls under the Defense Ministry, has permanent tenure.

The aviation crisis is the latest challenge for Mr. da Silva, who until recently had a more than 60 percent approval rating. Recent corruption scandals within his party have threatened to diminish Brazil's growing international standing on trade and economic fronts. The president waited three days after the accident before announcing any major changes to the civil aviation system.

Until Wednesday's dismissal of Mr. Pires, the government's major reaction was to propose to build a new airport in São Paulo, which will do little in the short term to improve airport infrastructure and security amid a rising tide of passengers, analysts said. Before last week's crash, Congonhas handled about 600 takeoffs and landings a day.

"This is going to be haunting Lula for some time," said Peter Hakim, the president of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, adding that the latest accident "is bringing attention to Brazil's broader infrastructure problems."