

Airplane Crashes Create Anxiety Among Brazil's Travelers

The New York Times
August 4, 2007

RIO DE JANEIRO, Aug. 3 — Alire Assis Brasil, in town to visit an aunt, waited patiently Thursday for her bus back to her home in Florianopolis — some 18 hours away.

She could have flown, a trip that should take two and a half hours. But in recent months she has chosen to avoid the uncertainties of [Brazil's](#) troubled aviation system, which worsened two weeks ago with the country's deadliest crash.

“The planes are a real worry these days,” said Ms. Assis, 42, who travels often between the cities. “The security of knowing when I’ll get there makes me take the bus.”

The crash was the second major deadly plane accident in 10 months, causing many Brazilians to reconsider air travel and leading some to switch to buses despite the inconvenience. Travelers are not only afraid for their safety, they also worry about long delays as officials try to adopt quick fixes for some of the problems, like being more cautious in questionable weather by grounding or redirecting flights, or making wholesale changes to routes, to take pressure off overwhelmed airports.

“It seems like we are going backward,” said Glória Maria Anniboleti, who was waiting Thursday at Rio’s international airport for a plane to Curitiba.

In recent years, low-cost carriers have spurred an explosion in the number of people flying. While many have welcomed the prices, some now question whether the system grew too big, too quickly, and without adequate investment, overburdening airport infrastructure and overwhelming air traffic controllers.

The high costs of long-term solutions are likely to push air travel again beyond the reach of many of Brazil's 187 million people.

The accident on July 17, which killed 199 people, has also deepened one of the worst political crises for President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) since he took office five years ago, adding to a litany of corruption scandals in recent months.

There are fears that the economy will suffer, as well. Tourism is already lagging. In addition, the accidents are raising new concerns among international investors about Brazil's shaky transportation infrastructure.

That air travel has come under such scrutiny is particularly difficult to accept here, considering Brazil's rich aviation tradition. A large country with protected rain forests, it has long relied on air travel to develop its economy and connect its people. The Brazilian hero Alberto Santos-Dumont took one of the first recorded flights in a boxy biplane around Paris in 1906, just three years after the Wright brothers' historic flight at Kitty Hawk. In more recent times, the Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer has become a major player in the executive jet market.

The sprouting of low-cost carriers in recent years — following the American and European models — had been pushing the country's airline industry forward as well.

Airfares have fallen 29 percent since 2001, according to a June report to investors by Gol, a discount entrant that has become Brazil's version of Southwest Airlines.

Passengers like Wellington Souza, 22, a Rio electrician who just began flying this year, have benefited from lower fares and the chance to pay for tickets in installments. Now he and others expect fares to rise along with insurance premiums and other fees for the airlines. TAM, the airline whose plane crashed last month, has reportedly allotted \$1.5

billion to compensate victims' families and for other accident-related costs.

Over the past two weeks, the government has focused on de-emphasizing Congonhas airport in São Paulo, where the accident occurred, as a hub for air traffic in the country. Nelson Jobim, whom Mr. da Silva appointed as defense minister after the crash, struck a firm tone on Thursday by insisting that he would not yield to pressure from the airlines to further discuss his decision to reallocate 151 flights that had passed through Congonhas.

Mr. da Silva, for his part, has been criticized for being absent from the scene for three days after the accident and for not doing more to reform aviation after an accident in September, when 154 people died in a midair collision of two planes over the Amazon. He said Thursday at a meeting of cabinet ministers and party leaders that he had not been aware of the scale of the aviation problems, comparing it to a cancer that caught him by surprise. "You think everything is O.K., only to discover that the problem is much bigger," he said.

The July disaster occurred as a plane was landing during a rainstorm. It skidded off a short, slippery runway, crashed into an office building and a gas station, and exploded.

Days of testimony before a Senate committee investigating the crash have become a blame game for the leaders of two agencies responsible for air travel, who have denied responsibility for reopening the runway at Congonhas before work could be completed to make it less slippery. In the three weeks before the accident, nearly a dozen pilots warned that the landing strip was potentially dangerous, with at least one complaining of hydroplaning.

Potential solutions are stark. Building new airports would take years, as would creating a rail link to a lesser-used airport outside of São Paulo. The government has already backed off from a plan to build a new São Paulo airport in favor of a new runway instead.

Data recovered from the TAM plane's flight recorder and the pilots' cockpit conversation have pointed toward possible pilot error or a mechanical problem with the plane's spoilers, or air brakes. But both Brazilians and outside experts are wary of conclusions that ignore the structural failings in the aviation system.

"Brazilian officials spend more time trying to cover up or hide what is going on than on improving the system," said Marc Baumgartner, president of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations in Montreal, which has warned that Brazil's system is not up to international standards.

With air travel in chaos, the stigma attached to lower-priced bus travel is fading fast. Rio's main intercity bus terminal was overflowing this week, with traffic up 30 percent since mid-July, said Beatriz Lima, the station's spokeswoman. Some executives have taken their first bus rides in recent days. "It is busier here than at Carnival," in February or March, typically the high tourist season, she said.

Inside the terminal, Sandra Oliveira, 30, waited in line to buy a ticket to Sao Paulo, about six hours away by bus. She stopped flying in March, after waiting for more than seven hours for her flight in Rio, she said. "I said never again, until they figure out this airline chaos."

One of Brazil's largest companies, Vale do Rio Doce, or CVRD, has employed a new, \$7 million Embraer corporate aircraft since September to ensure its employees do not face delays on some routes, said a company spokesman. Other companies are turning to videoconferencing to reduce employee travel.

And some visitors are simply canceling their trips. The rap artist Ice-T canceled scheduled performances, citing "aviation chaos," according to the Brazilian press.

Sandra Marques, a hotel owner in Trancoso, a town in Bahia State that is 22 hours by bus from São Paulo, said many Brazilians and Europeans had canceled reservations, a trend that she thought would continue.

“Tourists can choose where they go, and they are not going to choose to go to chaos,” she said.