

Brazilian Air Controllers Want Militaries Out and Dozens of New Staff

Contributed by Emerson Luiz
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For a week now Brazilians are facing 40-minute to 4-hour delays in all their major airports due to a work slowdown staged by the country's air controllers. The disruption is making life quite hard for those travelling during the All Souls Day holiday's prolonged weekend, which starts this Thursday, November 2.

São Paulo, Rio, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Recife and Fortaleza are some of the capital cities hit by the work-to-rule action started last Friday, October 27, to protest work overload, understaffing and low compensation.

The slowdown started in the Brazilian capital Brasília's airport where controllers decided to stick to strict rules of safety, increasing the distance between planes landing or taking off and decreasing the number of aircraft watched by each controller.

They argue that international rules establish that each operator shouldn't control more than 14 planes and that's what they intend to do.

The crisis triggered the intervention of president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva who summoned the sector's main authorities on Tuesday in search of a solution. Brazilian Defense Minister, Waldir Pires, announced some measures in an attempt to control the crisis, but he admitted that an agreement with the air controllers remains elusive in the short term.

Among the measures being implemented as a palliative are changes in routes so that flights don't need to use Brasília's control tower, cancellation of all vacation and days off and recruitment of new controllers.

Travel agencies are worried that people will start cancelling flights and giving up planned trips due to the slowdown if the situation is not brought soon under control.

After a meeting with minister Pires, the president of the National Flight Protection Workers Union, Jorge Botelho, said that the measures announced by the government are not enough to change the chaotic situation at the airports. He doesn't see any improvement in the picture in less than 10 days.

The only real solution, he says, is to increase the number of flight controllers. Transferring controllers from one center to the other would just spread the lack of resources, according to him. Botelho is also in favor of taking the civilian air control from military hands, which, he says only hurts the air controllers' work.

"Our position is that air control operations cannot work in a militarized structure. For quite some time air controllers have been asking the military that we have examinations for new air controllers. The last examination we had was 20 years ago."

Botelho argues that the Armed forces should mind the Air Defense and leave the management of the air traffic to the civilians. Among Brazil's 3,200 air controllers only 500 are civilians. According to him, only Brazil and Argentina still use the military model in South America and Argentina is already abandoning this approach:

"Argentina is already changing. Are we going to be the only country in South America that will keep walking backwards?"

The union chief blames the chaotic situation on the growth of Brazil's civilian aviation in the last two years without a corresponding planning by the Air Force command.

"In these past few years there was a tremendous growth and the number of flights grew. Despite the lack of staff we were able to keep working thanks to traffic management. With the recent departure of 18 controllers, however, some sectors were disabled. It doesn't do any good to activate a certain sector if there are not enough men to operate it."

Botelho denied that he and his colleagues are engaged in a work-to-rule action and assured that they are doing all they can under the circumstances. "How can we activate certain sectors if we have not enough men. We have to work managing the traffic flow. The separation between airplanes is increased so that the operators available are able to meet the demand."

While international rules require that each controller be responsible for up to 14 planes at the same time, according to Jorge Nunes, president of the Air Traffic Controllers Association of Rio de Janeiro, before the September 29 collision between the Boeing 737 and the Legacy jet, which left 154 dead, each controller was handling between 16 and 18 planes, simultaneously.

Botelho says that the understaffing problem had been taken to the Air Force command in 2004. At the time his association had urged the hiring of 64 new controllers. The proposal was approved by the Defense Ministry, he says, adding that he doesn't know why the Air Force didn't approve the request.

"All the problems faced by the controllers have been reported to management. If they don't communicate them to their superiors, it is because we have a militarized structure," he concluded.