

Brazilian Air Controllers Can't Leave Their Tower Before Sunday

Contributed by José Wilson Miranda
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Ulisses Fontenele, the former president of Brazil's Flight Controllers Association charged today, November 2, that 80 from a group of 190 air traffic controllers are being kept as "prisoners" and forced since yesterday by the Brazilian authorities to stay at the Brasília's Air Defense and Air Traffic Control Integrated Center (Cindacta 1).

"This is military quartering," he protested.

To face the chaotic situation in the Brazilian airports since a group of air controllers took a leave of absence for psychiatric treatment precipitated by the September 29 Boeing 737 collision with another small plane (154 people were killed in the crash), the Air Force decided to summon 149 military air traffic controllers to help in the emergency situation.

Fontenele criticizes the measure being taken by the Air Force brass saying they will not solve the problems with flight delays - up to 20 hours in some cases - taking place for a week now in all major Brazilian airports.

Fontenele accuses the Air Force of maintaining the air controllers in a closed space and forcing them to work under an extreme level of stress. Says he, "The stress is so high that you will even find people crying for not being able to handle such pressure." And he adds: "I want to know how are they going to sleep and whether is there any place for them to rest."

According to Fontenele, the military controllers have been threatened with court martial if they leave the Cindacta before Sunday, November 5. "If they are court-martialed," he informs, "they lose all their rights."

Fontenele said that he only decided to speak out because the president of the Controller's Association, Wellington Rodrigues, has been suffering all kinds of pressure from Brazil's aviation authorities to keep quiet.

For Fontenele, who was a flight controller himself, a solution for the present chaos has to include the demilitarization of the air traffic controller's career. That would allow the creation of plan establishing job descriptions and wages for the profession.

Today, a controller starts with a 1,600 reais (US\$ 748) monthly salary and won't make more than 3,200 reais as long as he stays there. A recent raise proposal was not approved because air controllers would then make more than some high-ranking military officers.

The low salary is being a drain to the profession. Many controllers are leaving after the minimum five-year period they are committed to when they start the job. They find out that they can make more money and avoid much stress in other occupations.

Air Force brigadier known only by his last name Bueno denied that the controllers are prisoners. "They are military. They haven't been taken into custody, they are not prisoners. They have been summoned. This is a military barrack and there is always the possibility that they might be called to do some overtime."

Bueno also informed that the controllers have a doctor and five psychologists at their disposal. Those who can't handle the situation will be able to go home, he assured.