
Air Controller's Mutiny in Brazil Shuts All Airports in the Country

Contributed by Émerson Luiz
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An unprecedented rebellion by Brazil's air traffic controllers, most of them military, paralyzed this Friday, March 30, all 49 commercial airports in the country. According to Infraero, Brazil's airport authority, no plane was being allowed to take off. The air control towers were only letting incoming air traffic.

The rebellious flight controllers told the Cindacta-1 (Brazilian capital Brasília central control tower) brass that their strike would continue and all incoming and outgoing traffic would stop entirely until the authorities negotiated with them. The work stoppage started at 6:44 pm in Brasília.

Cindacta-1 is an important control center, which monitors flights for the most important air hubs in the country in the states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Goiás, Espírito Santo, among others. The controllers' action left thousands of passengers stranded in airports.

With President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva out of the country for a meeting with Bush this weekend in Camp David, acting president José Alencar, rushed back from Belo Horizonte to Brasília. He only was able to fly after getting special clearance from the Air Force leadership.

Still on the air on his way to Washington, Lula intervened in the crisis to avoid that some air controllers be taken to jail as was the Air Force top command's wish.

The Military Public Prosecutor's Office had already issued arrest orders against 18 flight controllers, who were charged with mutiny. The Justice Military prosecutor, Ione de Souza Cruz, was on her way to make the arrests when came word that Lula had decided that they should negotiate with the insubordinate controllers.

It was already Saturday, when the Brazilian government announced that it had reached an agreement with the controllers. Apparently they won all their main demands including no punishment for the rebels and a demilitarization - at least partial - of the sector. The government also promised to raise their salaries.

Brazilian Planning Minister, Paulo Bernardo, arrived at the Cindacta-1's headquarters to negotiate with the controllers and try to get them back to work at about 11 pm. He was accompanied by brigadier Ramon Cardoso, the Air Force's Air Space Control Department director.

Besides the Air Force Commander, Juniti Saito, other ministers got involved in the negotiations including Social Communication's Minister, Franklin Martins; Institutional Security Minister, Jorge Armando Félix and the presidency's

Chief of Staff, Gilberto Carvalho.

Among the controllers' demands were better working conditions, higher wages and the category's demilitarization. About 80% of the country's air controllers are military men today.

The rebellion started Friday morning, as a response to the transfer of sergeant Edleuzo Souza Cavalcanti, an air-controller leader, from Brasília to Santa Maria in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. To protest this relocation over 100 of his colleagues at Cindacta -1, Brasília's air control center, went into a hunger strike. In Mato Grosso state a group of air controllers soon joined the movement staging a work to rule campaign.

Flying in Brazil has been problematic since September 29 when a Boeing 737 collided with a Legacy executive jet killing all 154 passengers and crew aboard the Boeing over the Amazon rainforest. Since then Brazil has faced several chaotic situations in the airports during times of increased air traffic like All Souls Day holiday, Christmas and Carnaval.

Defense Minister, Waldir Pires, said Friday afternoon that a democratic state could not become hostage of anybody. "There is no negotiation with the controllers," he stated at the time, while saying that he recognized that their demands were "legitimate." It just took a few hours before his no-negotiation warning was trampled by the facts.