
After Giving In to Blackmail Brazil Gets Tough With Air Controllers

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The Brazilian government toughened its position in negotiations with air traffic controllers Tuesday, April 3, amid fears a new strike could wreak havoc with flights over the Easter weekend. A strike by air traffic controllers Friday, March 30, halted flights nationwide for nearly five hours.

It ended when the government agreed to the controllers' demands for a bonus, review of the promotions system and change in the military status of some controllers to civilian.

But on Monday, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva called the strikers "irresponsible" and appeared to back off a key demand that air traffic controllers be removed from military jurisdiction.

Silva's reversal was apparently due to discontent in the military over his appearing to condone the controllers' violation of orders.

"We want to negotiate with all parties, but we will not do this with a knife at the throat," Planning Minister Paulo Bernardo said Tuesday following a meeting with representatives of the striking controllers. "It is very difficult to negotiate with constant threats...of turning Easter into an inferno."

The controllers' representatives left the meeting without speaking to reporters, but in a statement issued earlier, the Brazilian Association of Air Traffic Controllers said "there is no intention to paralyze work during Easter week."

Friday's strike was called to protest an Air Force decision to transfer top workers, a move strikers saw as retaliation for the slowdowns they have staged periodically over the past six months.

On Monday, the military prosecutor's office asked the Air Force to investigate if middle- and low-level controllers were insubordinate - leaving open the possibility that some of the strikers could be imprisoned.

Brazil's travel headaches began last year when the country's one-time flagship airline Varig nearly disintegrated under crushing debt, causing mass cancellations in Brazil and abroad.

In March, hundreds of flights from major airports were delayed after a failure in air traffic control in Brazil's heavily

populated southern and central areas.

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