
Brazil's Answer to Air Travel Chaos: To Build a New Airport

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Three days after Brazil's worst air accident ever, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva addressed the nation and promised that in 90 days he will be announcing the construction of a new airport for the city of São Paulo.

Lula five minutes speech late Friday evening begun with a message to the "hearts of all Brazilians" asking God to give strength to all the families of the victims of the Tuesday air accident, when a landing TAM Airbus 320 skidded off Congonhas's airport runway and crashed into a repairs building killing all 187 passengers and crew members plus ground personnel.

Only 45 bodies were identified until now by the coroner's office. The work of rescuers has turned now to collecting fragments of bodies under the rubble with the help of search dogs.

Congonhas airport is Brazil's busiest with over 20 million travelers annually, but it is also one of the most difficult for pilots since runways are too short for large modern aircraft, and the whole area is insufficiently drained causing additional problems when it rains.

Originally in the middle of fields, but now trapped in the sprawling cement of São Paulo, Congonhas has become the hub for regional flights and has suffered several tragic accidents in the last few years.

However as promised by Lula, Congonhas traffic will in the future be significantly reduced to flights in the São Paulo region and the Rio/São Paulo shuttle, a new international air terminal is to be built and overall air safety should be improved.

A federal judge closed Congonhas for several days last summer on safety grounds and it was reopened on promises of improved runways drainage conditions. This Friday, 19 pilots refused to land in Congonhas fearful of what happened last Tuesday.

Lula promised a rigorous investigation into all events of last Tuesday but also cautioned that it will all be done with no "precipitation or impassiveness", adding that "we don't want to condemn or absolve with precipitated actions so as not to commit possible injustice."

Besides practical common sense measures for the airport, Lula promised to exert greater influence over the Civil Aviation Agency to ensure they act in defense of travelers; a modernization of Brazil's air traffic conditions thus cutting drastically potential risks.

As to the cause of the accident, TAM airlines revealed early Friday that a thrust reverser from the crashed aircraft had been deactivated during maintenance checks.

The reversers can be used to help jets slow down on landing but TAM Airlines insisted the deactivation was in accordance with proper procedures and "in conditions stipulated by the maintenance of the manufacturer Airbus and approved by Brazil's National Civil Aviation Agency".

Tam Airlines' comments came after Brazil's Globo TV said a problem with the right thrust reverser had emerged four days before the crash.

Tam said Airbus's own manual says an inspection can be done up to 10 days after it is first detected and that the plane can continue to operate in the meantime. The same plane, it was reported, had problems landing at Congonhas the day before the crash.