

After Brazil's Air Tragedy São Paulo Says New Airport Isn't Priority

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A radar failure over the Amazon forced Brazil to turn back or ground a string of international flights Saturday, deepening a national aviation crisis just hours after the president unveiled safety measures prompted by the country's deadliest air disaster.

Further shaking Brazilians' confidence, authorities said they had mistaken a piece of the fuselage from Tuesday's accident for the flight recorder and sent it to the United States for analysis.

The radar outage from 11:15 p.m. Friday to 2:30 a.m. Saturday, caused by an electrical problem, forced at least 700 flights heading to Brazil from the U.S. to return to their points of origin and make unscheduled landings at airports from Puerto Rico to Chile.

Eight of the 17 planes flying in the coverage area of the radar system were rerouted, and some airlines canceled flights bound for Brazil.

While the nation has had chronic problems with delays and cancellations on domestic flights over the past 10 months, the radar outage was the first time that international flights have been severely affected.

The confusion followed a nationally televised speech by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who tried to calm the nation Friday night by announcing new safety measures and saying authorities will build a new airport in Sao Paulo, where an Airbus A320 operated by TAM Airlines crashed, killing at least 191 people.

All 187 people aboard and at least four on the ground died when the jetliner raced down the runway, skipped over a crowded highway and exploded in a fireball that was still smoldering three days later. Many experts have said that the short, rain-slicked runway could have contributed to the disaster at the downtown Congonhas airport, Brazil's busiest.

Silva's speech Friday night was his first public pronouncement about the crash except for a brief statement.

"Our aviation system, in spite of the investments we have made in expansion and modernization of almost all Brazilian airports, is passing through difficulties," Silva said. "The security of our aviation system is compatible with all the international standards. We cannot lose sight of this."

Silva said aviation officials will limit the number of flights and restrict the weight of planes traveling into Congonhas airport and that the location of the new airport will be chosen within 90 days.

But São Paulo's Mayor Gilberto Kassab told reporters Saturday that building a new airport, which could take between five and 10 years, was not a priority for the city, which would instead seek to claim houses around Congonhas airport as eminent domain in order to lengthen runways.

Also Saturday, officials said they had mistakenly sent part of the plane's fuselage to the United States, thinking it was the flight recorder.

Gen. Jorge Kersul Filho, head of the air force's accident prevention division, told reporters in São Paulo that the real flight recorder had been located early Saturday in the wreckage and would be sent to Washington for analysis, a process expected to take several days.

The radar outage was caused when a short circuit cut off electricity during routine maintenance Friday night in the jungle city of Manaus, Brazil's Air Force said in a statement. Power was restored by 1:30 a.m. Saturday and the radar coverage was working again an hour later.

When the power went out, 17 flights were within the coverage area of the radar system in a large swath of the Amazon, the statement said. Nine planes continued to their destinations, and eight were rerouted. None of the jets were in any danger, the statement said.

The problem forced American Airlines to divert 13 Brazil-bound planes that had departed from New York, Miami and Dallas, said company spokeswoman Mary Frances Fagan.

Two American Airlines flights from São Paulo to Miami made unscheduled landings in Manaus, said Celso Gick, a spokesman for Brazilian airport authority Infraero. Brazilian media reported that another American Airlines flight landed in Santiago, Chile.

Four United Airlines flights were also canceled as a result of the outage, spokeswoman Robin Urbanski said. In addition, Brazil's Globo TV reported on its Web site that Brazil-bound flights from Colombia, Panama and Venezuela were affected.

The September Gol crash in the Amazon was the country's worst air disaster until Tuesday's accident and it exposed widespread problems with the country's air traffic control system.

It also touched off months of work slowdowns by air traffic controllers protesting precarious working conditions. Congressional investigations turned up holes in the country's radar coverage; antiquated equipment and flight controllers with only rudimentary knowledge of English.

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