

## Brazil Gets New Aviation Chief Amid Growing Airport Chaos

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Brazil's president fired his defense minister, who is also the civil aviation chief, on Wednesday, July 25, hoping to bring an end to nearly a year of chaos in the military-controlled aviation system, including flight cancellations that have stranded thousands of travelers following last week's passenger jet crash, the deadliest ever in Brazil.

To reduce the delays and cancellations, Brazil's aviation authority has temporarily suspended all ticket sales for flights to and from Congonhas, in São Paulo city, the country's busiest airport and the place of the latest crash.

The office of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said former Supreme Court President Nelson Jobim, 61, will replace Waldir Pires, 80, who had come under withering criticism for his failure to improve the situation.

The Air Force oversees Brazil's air traffic control system, which has been under increasing scrutiny since last year's crash of a passenger jet that collided with a small plane over the Amazon, leaving 154 dead. Last week's crash of a TAM jet at Sao Paulo's Congonhas airport killed at least 199 people, replacing the Amazon crash as Brazil's worst air disaster.

The chaos continued Wednesday as TAM, Brazil's No. 1 airline, canceled dozens of flights to and from Congonhas, citing safety concerns over heavy rain and the airport's runway. According to Brazil's airports authority of 1074 flights at national level, 184 were cancelled and 386 delayed for over an hour.

TAM's main Brazilian competitor, Gol, recommended that travelers postpone flying until Monday. "In this period, the company hopes to re-establish the normal flux of air traffic," Gol said.

Meanwhile the Congonhas airport controversy persists. Officials have closed the 1,939-meter (6362-foot) runway, short by modern standards, amid claims it is dangerous when wet. Investigators probing the July 17 crash need to "complete their inspection to see whether it played any role in the disaster," said Infraero spokeswoman Ana Carla Mafra.

Many critics blame Silva's administration for failing to invest enough in airports over the past five years while the number of flights and passengers has increased dramatically. Investigators say the runway is being probed as a possible crash factor, but government officials have repeatedly denied it played a role in the crash.

TAM Flight 3054 sped down the Congonhas runway instead of slowing down, jumped a highway and hit a gas station and an air cargo building, killing 187 people aboard and at least another 12 on the ground.

Brig. Gen. Jorge Kersul, who leads the air force's air accident investigation center, said that the plane landed normally but was unable to slow down and crashed at 175 kilometers per hour. The airline said one of the Airbus 320's two thrust reversers was deactivated, something allowed under safety regulations.

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