
Brazil Outraged by Suggestion that New Air Accident Is Matter of Time

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The head of an international air traffic controllers organization who said that it was only "a matter of time" before there was a new air disaster in Brazil was rebuffed by Brazilian Defense Minister, Nelson Jobim, Brazil's top aviation official.

In an interview to Brazil's official government news agency, Radiobrás, Minister Jobim defended Brazil's air traffic control system and said comments that another air accident was inevitable were politically motivated.

"This is a game within the corporation, in other words, they're playing politics. We can't excuse this type of manifestation," Jobim told Radiobrás.

Jobim's remarks came in response to comments Marc Baumgartner, president of the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers made to the BBC Brazil Wednesday at a seminar in the United States.

According to BBC Brazil, Baumgartner said "it's a question of time before a new air accident happens again in Brazil."

Baumgartner also harshly criticized the Brazilian Air Force, which oversees the nation's air traffic control system, for trying to punish the controllers involved in the Sept. 29, 2006 crash of a Boeing 737 operated by Gol Linhas Aereas Inteligentes SA over the Amazon, killing all 154 people aboard.

"The Brazilian Air Force invested lots of energy to arrest and prosecute its own workers but none to fix its (air traffic control) system," Baumgartner was quoted by the O Globo news agency.

The September 29 crash was Brazil's worst air disaster until July, when a TAM Linhas Aereas SA Airbus crashed into a warehouse in São Paulo killing 199 people. The second accident had wide ranging political repercussions, with many accusing the government of failing to act on problems exposed by the Gol crash.

Following the accident President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva sacked Defense Minister, Waldir Pires, and named Jobim who was given full support to implement all reforms he considered necessary to improve the Brazilian air system.

One of the steps taken was to redistribute operations from Brazil's busiest air terminal Congonhas in São Paulo to other airports and drastically cutting flight delays and cancellations. Jobim is also considering the possibility of handing air

traffic control from the Air Force to civilians.

However Jobim admits that to a certain extent the "feeling of lack of safety and chaos persists" and has repeatedly requested for support from travellers.

Earlier this week, a military court declined to indict five Brazilian air traffic controllers in connection with the Gol crash. Military prosecutors want to try four of the controllers on charges of breaking regulations, and the other one faces charges of involuntary manslaughter.

Four of the controllers and two American pilots who were aboard and executive jet that collided with the 737 still face charges in a civilian criminal court in connection with the accident.

A Congressional commission investigating air chaos in Brazil just issued its final report. The report excluded a request to indict four air traffic controllers in connection with the Gol crash but supported the indictment of American pilots Joseph Lepore and Jan Paladino.

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