

Concerns over the Thai air crash

John Christian
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Some disturbing issues have emerged regarding the crash of the Thai Airways International (THAI) airbus at Surat Thani airport on December 12, in which 101 of the 146 people on board died. Flight TG 261 from Bangkok was due to land at the tourist resort in southern Thailand at 6.55 pm but ran into a storm at the airport. Darkness and rain resulted in greatly reduced visibility.

The aircraft made three attempts to land. On the first two the pilot told the control tower that he could not see the runway clearly--a fact that has now been confirmed by the recovered cockpit voice recorder. On the third attempt the pilot asked about the conditions on the ground and was given a "clear to land" from the tower. According to the controller, the aircraft passed by, overshot the runway and crashed into nearby swampland. The fuselage fractured, creating a fire, and other sections of the plane disintegrated.

Rescuers were hampered by a lack of equipment. Much of the initial work took place with little more than torches and bare hands in darkness, heavy rain and waist-deep swamp water. Like most airports in Thailand, Surat Thani does not have its own rescue vehicles and equipment; it has to rely on the local government and the military.

THAI president Thamnoon Wanglee indicated that the families of the dead would receive compensation for their losses. But instead of the \$US100,000 initially promised, the insurers indicated that payment would be made case-by-case on the basis of the victim's "station in life". An air hostess, for instance, would be worth only \$80,000. THAI is expected to receive \$18.27 million in insurance for the aircraft.

Both THAI and the press in Thailand immediately sought to blame the crash on "pilot error". THAI executives claimed that the airline had a standing policy that pilots should divert to other airports if they had been unable to land after two attempts. An

Aviation Department official stated that normal flight practice required pilots to abort landings if they could not see the runway clearly after descending to 60 metres.

But as a fellow THAI pilot pointed out, the aircrew is under considerable pressure from management to land aircraft and save all the costs of an aborted flight. "Flying back to Bangkok meant you cost the airline too much extra. This could have weighed on the man at the crucial moment," he said.

A letter to the *Nation* newspaper clearly pointed to the broader issues involved in the crash: "I am sick and tired of the speculation about which employee was at fault in the tragic flight of TG 261. Surat Thani airport was not having a local thunderstorm: it was experiencing a globally recognised storm that had tracked West all week, causing fishing, marine and oil fields operations to evacuate in its path at the cost of millions of dollars.

"The management of THAI Air allowed a night flight to a destination being lashed by this tropical depression. The airfield ILS system was disabled previously by action of the management. If operations management discussed this flight and authorised it, then their decision should be analysed and be made public. If the management failed to recognise and discuss the conditions of this flight, then it was just plain negligence."

The ILS or Instrument Landing System had been dismantled at least six months previously as part of construction at the airport to lengthen the runway. The ILS, which employs two radio beams to provide pilots with vertical and horizontal guidance during the landing, is the preferred system for conditions of reduced visibility or almost zero visibility.

A Thai air force pilot who had just flown into Surat Thani airport told reporters that the removal of the ILS system meant pilots had to use a less accurate radio

(VHF) navigation system (DVOR) that relies on a visual sighting of the runway once the aircraft has descended to 152 metres. "In bad weather all pilots prefer the ILS system over the radio system," he said.

The House Committee on Transportation, which is probing the crash, has criticised the lack of maintenance at the Surat Thani airport and the acquiescence of THAI management. According to committee vice chairman Sunai Julapongsathorn, the ILS need not have been removed and should have been out of action for 24 hours at most.

THAI management claimed the navigation systems at the airport were up to international standards. Yet not only had the ILS system been removed but other equipment at Surat Thani had been turned off or was not functioning.

Along the runway, every second tracklight had been turned off as a cost-cutting measure--increasing the distance between lights from 60 to 120 metres. These lights help the pilot to identify the main runway path as a recognisable shape and to distinguish the airport from its surroundings, such as city lights or a long housing block.

Airport officials have now admitted that some of the lights required new globes and others were broken, resulting in a further break up of the shape pattern of the runway.

Furthermore, a set of Precision Approach-Path Indicator (PAPI) lights, usually installed at the approach end of a runway, had also been removed. PAPI lights, which are seen as different colours according to the altitude of the aircraft, enable a pilot to judge his height and glidepath more precisely.

The rundown of equipment at Surat Thani airport and the pressures on pilots and staff are part of the restructuring of the airline industry not just in Thailand but internationally. The Thai government plans to privatise the country's airports and to sell off 50 percent of THAI. Driven by sharpening competition, airlines are involved in frantic cost-cutting measures including staff and maintenance cuts, which increase the dangers of tragic crashes such as that of TG 261.

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