Indian air crash highlights declining safety standards

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An Indian Airlines Boeing 737 crashed into a government housing estate in Patna, capital of the eastern Indian state of Bihar, on July 17, killing 57 people, including six residents, and wounding dozens more. This tragic incident has once again highlighted the decay of Indian infrastructure, including safety controls. Over the past 15 years more than 1,000 people have lost their lives in major air disasters.

The plane, operated by Alliance Air, a subsidiary of the state-owned Indian Airlines, caught on fire and crashed in the early morning, around 7.30am. As firemen worked to douse the flames, some in the crowd of about 3,000 local residents formed a human chain to pass buckets of water to the burning plane in the hope of rescuing passengers.

Among the dead were the two pilots. Only seven passengers survived. They were admitted to the Patna Medical College and Hospital and then transferred to New Delhi, 1,000 kilometres away. According to media reports, they are struggling for their lives.

The national government and Civil Aviation authorities immediately ruled out any technical fault in the aircraft and sought to blame the two pilots, Captain Sohan Pal, who had clocked 4,326 flying hours, and Captain A. S. Bagga. Indian Airlines regional director S.K. Ghorai and other officials also denied that the plane caught fire before it crashed.

Indian newspapers reported, however, that eyewitnesses contradicted these claims. One survivor, Rohit Ranjan, who was sitting by the window in the front section of the aircraft, said: "The plane started swaying as we were coming into land and I saw smoke coming from the engine."

Witnesses on the ground said the plane was smoking or in flames before it crashed. According to a *Reuters* report, one eye-witness, Suresh Rai, said: "The plane was shaking ... the window was open, and the pilot was waving and shouting at civilians on the ground to get out the way."

The Commercial Pilots Association rejected the government's attempts to make the pilots scapegoats for the accident. "Captain M.S. Sohan Pal and Captain A.S. Bagga were both professionally qualified with [an] unblemished track record," it said, "and it is because of their professional competence that seven passengers survived the fatal accident."

The government is trying to hide the real issues, which relate to the crisis of the Indian air industry. The plane was 20-years-old and was due to be grounded by the end of the year. The *Times of India* commented: "It must be questioned whether a 20-year-old aircraft was air worthy in the first place, given our poor maintenance standards."

Indian Airlines launched Alliance Air in 1996 as a low-cost service for domestic travelers. Its fleet is made up of old planes discarded by Indian Airlines, including Boeing 737s.

According to a report in the *Statesman,* the average age of Alliance's fleet, which has a reputation for frequent delays and technical problems, is over 18 years. Its "newest" aircraft is 17.8 years old, and the oldest 22. Yet Indian aviation guidelines call for aircraft to be grounded after 20 years. Nevertheless, both Indian Airlines and Civil Aviation officials sought to justify the use of old aircraft, saying the only issue was maintenance.

Sections of the Indian media have accused Alliance Air of flying "low cost" death traps. During the past six months, Alliance planes were reportedly forced to land under full emergency conditions on account of engine failures at least 18 times. On an equal number of occasions, hydraulic failures developed, leading to the collapse of control and landing systems.

A senior official in the aviation sector effectively confirmed the dilapidated state of the fleet, admitting that the government had planned to convert some of the ageing aircraft into cargo planes. According to one report, some senior officials submitted a report on fleet's condition, seeking its total replacement. One official even threatened to resign if the fleet was not junked.

A senior Indian Airlines engineer, who has been working for more than a decade in the Boeing 737-200 maintenance team, gave a personal account, describing the conditions in the industry:

"The problem is our outdated systems and procedures, cost-cutting where it should not be done, poor working

conditions, lack of planning, the bureaucracy... The problem is not the machine or the people. The problem is with the system. When an aircraft comes in for release for a flight, I have just 20 minutes to decide whether it will fly or not. I handle 3-4 flights in each 10-hour shift, which usually stretches to 12-14 hours. I have to supervise the cleaning and the upkeep of the cabin as well. The engineer could be pressured to release an aircraft even if it isn't completely safe."

A recent report by the Airport Authority of India revealed that critical navigational aids, such as the Instrument Tracking System and the Conventional Very High Frequency Omni, are not properly maintained and are due, or overdue, for calibration at almost all India's airports because of lack of resources. S. S. Sidhu, former Secretary General of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, said: "Sometimes, the problem is that our safety equipment is there, but it is not functional."

Less than four years ago, in November 1996, 349 people were killed when a Saudi airliner collided with a Kazakh cargo plane over Delhi. Other fatalities caused by Indian Airlines Boeing 737 crashes include: 53 killed in April 1993, in western India; 69 in August 1991 at Imphal, Manipur; and 131 killed in October 1988 near Ahmedabad. An Airbus 320 owned by Indian Airlines crashed in February 1990 at Bangalore airport killing 92 people.

After the 1996 tragedy, a judicial inquiry was set up to investigate India's air traffic facilities. It found that air traffic controllers lacked sufficient training in modern handling procedures and that airports like Delhi were using outdated surveillance radar. But since then, new air traffic control systems have been installed in only two major international airports, Bombay and Delhi.

No better results can be expected from a court inquiry into this week's crash, ordered by Civil Aviation Minister Sharad Yadav, a member of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government. Without even waiting for the result, he rejected calls for the grounding of the Alliance Air fleet.

Such official inquiries are only appointed to cover up the root causes and identify scapegoats. Any recommendations invariably end up in the dustbin. Air Traffic Controllers Guild general secretary Brijendra Shekhar said in a statement on July 17: "After each accident there is an inquiry, which eventually submits its report in a year or two but there is no mechanism to get these reports implemented. No one is accountable for failing to implement the report."

Furthermore, the government intends to wash its hands of responsibility by paying meagre compensation to the victims who travelled in the plane. Poor families in the residential area who lost their homes and possessions have angrily denounced the government for denying them compensation.

The degeneration of safety conditions is not confined to air travel. Recent years have seen increasing road and railway accidents, claiming thousands of lives. Last August, for example, 288 people were killed and hundreds more injured in a West Bengal railway accident. It was later revealed that no proper safety measures had been installed, because of lack of government funds.

The opening up of the Indian economy to foreign capital has led to major increases in air and ground traffic. However, the present BJP-led government, as well as the previous Congress and the United Front governments, has failed to improve and modernise the infrastructure. They have been concerned about cutting government expenditure to ensure business profitability, not protecting the travelling public.

The latest disaster has brought renewed calls from ruling circles for the privatisation of the airline industry and airports, on the grounds that this is the only way to provide adequate funds to rectify the safety crisis. In a July 19 editorial, the *Hindu* wrote: "If the Government and the Airports Authority do not have the funds to implement their recommendations, it is high time they expedited the corporatisation or privatisation of the airports."

Contrary to these claims, air transport in the wealthy countries, such as the United States, has become less and less safe as the industry has been deregulated. Moreover, dangerous cost-cutting and the lowering of safety standards are taking place around the world as airlines slash costs and demand lower taxes in order to undercut their rivals.