

Authorities scapegoat pilots for Singapore Airlines crash in Taiwan

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7 November 2000

Less than three days after the fatal crash of a Singapore Airlines flight SQ006 at Taipei's Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport, authorities blamed "pilot error" for the accident. But facts have already begun to emerge that point to a number of other causes, some of which are directly linked to cost-saving measures by airlines and airport authorities.

The death toll has risen to 82 people with the death of a survivor in hospital. Another 81 passengers were injured. Only 16 people, including the aircraft's cockpit crew, escaped unhurt from the 747-400 jumbo. Many of those killed were burnt beyond recognition.

Investigations in Taiwan have confirmed that just before midnight on November 1 the Los Angeles-bound flight had attempted to take off in typhoon conditions from a runway that had been closed for repair. As it was leaving the ground, the plane struck a metre-high concrete barrier and some construction equipment, split into three pieces and crashed, bursting into flames.

Singapore Airlines had previously dismissed the suggestion that the aircraft had been on the wrong runway, claiming it had veered across the medium strip. After investigations ruled out this possibility, Chang Yu-hern, director-general of Taiwan's airport authority, the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA), pinned the blame on the aircrew. "The three pilots must shoulder all responsibility," he said on Saturday.

Singapore Airlines has accepted "full responsibility" for the crash, saying it was obviously a case of "pilot error". The airline has offered \$400,000 in compensation to the relatives of each of the dead and announced it will meet the medical expenses of the injured and discuss compensation with them.

The pilots have been detained in Taiwan and may face charges of involuntary manslaughter. John Findlay, general secretary of the Hong Kong Aircrew Officers Association, condemned the rush to judgement, saying that it could take months or even years to find out what caused the accident.

To ascribe the crash to "pilot error" does not answer the

key question: how could experienced pilots make such a fundamental and fatal mistake? Malaysian captain C.K. Foong who was in charge of the aircraft was a highly competent pilot with more than 11,000 hours flying time. He knew the airport, having used it 10 times before the accident.

A number of factors were involved.

Weather conditions played a significant role. At the time, tropical storm Xangsang, which had caused devastation across the Philippines, was approaching Taiwan. Winds of up to 144kph and heavy rain were lashing the airport and causing poor visibility. The intended runway was near the one under repair and the two had almost identical identification numbers, adding to the chance of confusion.

International airport regulations require a runway under repair to be cordoned off. But the disused strip at Taipei had not been completely blocked off because it was frequently used for taxi-ing aircraft. CAA assistant director Chang Kuo-cheng said closing down the runway entirely "would have created serious delays for planes lining up for departure".

Instead, a barrier of concrete blocks had been erected 1,000 metres down the runway at the beginning of the construction zone and marked with a light. Airport authorities have confirmed that visibility on the evening was below 500 to 600 metres. "The pilots might not have been able to see the signal," because of the weather conditions, CAA deputy director-general Billy Chang admitted.

Questions have also been raised as to whether the runways were correctly lit. According to CAA spokesman Kay Yong, the centre lights—green on the closed runway and white on the active one—were on. While the centre lights were operating, investigators have yet to determine whether the "edge lights" running along the sides of the closed runway were on or off. "If the lights on the runway were not on, then the runway would not have looked like a runway," Yong said.

The airport is not equipped with ground radar so the control tower could not visually check if the plane was on the correct runway. Yong said that on the night "visibility was too low to physically see the jet from the tower".

Ground radar is in operation at many large airports internationally but like all sophisticated electronic monitoring equipment it is expensive. The installation of ground radar at Taipei airport would have been costly and would have required an additional air traffic controller to constantly monitor it.

According to San Francisco-based attorney Gerald Sterns, who specialises in representing air crash victims' families, under such conditions the control tower should have warned the pilots by radio about the closed runway. "The 'black box' cockpit recorder indicated that wasn't done with the Singapore Airlines flight," he said.

Questions are also raised about whether the aircraft should have been attempting to take off at all in the prevailing bad weather. Singapore Airlines follows Boeing's guideline of allowing takeoffs if crosswinds are lower than 55.2 kph. The airline claims that crosswinds were blowing at no more than 27.2 kph when flight SQ006 tried to take off. But a Taiwan Aviation Safety Council report stated that the winds were between 43.2 kph and 49.6 kph.

The Taiwanese carrier EVA Air had scrapped three flights shortly before the Singapore Airline crash, because crosswinds had reached more than 88 kph. While the Taipei control tower provides the most precise weather data available, the airport authority acknowledged that the information is not "real time"—that is, it is dated, but the authority refused to say by how much.

Significantly, at Taipei and many other airports around the world, the pilot decides whether or not to take off in bad weather. Runways are only closed if pilots insist on flying in conditions that the airport authorities feel present an "immediate danger to the aircraft". Airport operations are maintained even when wind conditions are higher than the safety levels recommended by aircraft manufacturers.

Obviously pilots are under pressure from airlines to maintain tight schedules and avoid costly delays. Hong Kong-based aviation expert Jim Eckes this week called for the procedure to be changed, insisting that it should be the responsibility of airports to shut down in extremely bad weather.

Eckes pointed out that the fatal crash of a China Airlines aircraft at Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok airport in August last year also happened under typhoon conditions. He said that it was too soon to say whether the storm had played a role in the Taipei crash but the incident highlighted the problems bad weather could cause.

"My feeling is that the airport authorities should exercise the decision-making about their own airport—do they keep it open or don't they? Hong Kong airport says, 'we stay open and the pilot can make his own decision'. In the United States, whenever you have a hurricane coming up the East

Coast, all the airports are closed in its path."

Eckes pointed out that unlike the pilots, the airport authority has the benefit of advanced radar technology and other instrumentation on which to base a decision. "Pilots need help, especially in difficult conditions. There are turbulence or wind shear problems which the plane's system doesn't indicate," he said.

Taken together, all these factors point to the conclusion that "pilot error" is a convenient way of making the aircrew the scapegoat for the SQ006 crash.

Dr Graham Braithwaite, an aircraft safety expert at the University of New South Wales, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, when air authorities speak of "pilot error" it should be borne in mind that this is a complex issue. "Pilot error is not the cause but a symptom of a whole number of factors that have come together to produce the disaster," he said.

"There should have been other ways and procedures to prevent the accident happening. The use of ground monitoring would certainly have ensured the crash in Taiwan would not have occurred," he added.

Speaking on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio, Braithwaite said that over the last 30 years, air safety statistics had remained fairly static with an accident rate of one per million departures. But he warned that the increasing number of flights would result in an alarming rise in the accident rate in the next 10 to 15 years. "The Boeing Company has predicted that by 2010 or 2015 at the latest, there will be one wide-bodied aircraft crashing every week," he said.

This staggering prediction does not tell the whole story, however. Air safety is being compromised by cost-cutting, economic restructuring and privatisation throughout the industry, driven by intense rivalry between airlines. In many cases, aircraft maintenance programs are being wound back, aircrew are being put under pressure to work longer hours and the latest safety technology is not used as a matter of course.

As the latest disaster in Taiwan indicates, when it comes to key issues—to block off a runway, to install ground radar, and bad weather takeoffs and landings—it is profit that very often decides.



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