

Madrid plane crash: Pilot's union warned months before that cut-backs placing passengers at risk

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After the worst Spanish air tragedy in 25 years on Wednesday, accident investigators have begun examining the wreckage of the plane that crashed at Madrid's Barajas airport, killing 153 passengers. Just 19 passengers have survived the crash, 5 of whom are said to be in a critical condition, with horrific injuries. The captain and co-pilot are confirmed among the dead.

Flight JK5022 was bound for Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, off the West African coast, and was carrying mostly Spanish and German tourists, as well as nationals from another 10 countries.

Witnesses said the left engine burst into flames seconds after the plane left the ground. It got a short distance into the air before veering suddenly to one side and splitting in half at the end of the runway. The survivors were flung into the air and landed in a nearby stream, which saved them from being burned alive in the huge fireball that erupted.

Dozens of emergency vehicles were prevented from immediately accessing the site because the whole area was in flames. The situation was made worse by the field of dry grass that caught fire.

One emergency services worker said, "It's the closest thing to Hell I've seen. The corpses were boiling, everything was burning. There was nothing left that resembled a plane, it was in pieces. It's a miracle anyone survived."

A woman said, "I saw it take off and it climbed to about 200 metres when flames appeared in the engine. It then crashed to the ground and disappeared from view in a hollow past the end of the runway."

Ligia Palomino, 41, a doctor with Madrid's ambulance service, was rescued by her own colleagues who wept as they treated her, surrounded by lifeless bodies.

She reported, "The plane left the gate for take-off at 1.20 pm but then the pilot apologised and said he would have to return because of a technical problem."

"An hour later, we went to take off. I heard a horrible noise and the next thing I remember was being flung from

the aircraft. I must have passed out but woke when there was a loud explosion.

"I could hardly move but lifted my head and saw other bodies around me. There was incredible heat and I heard people and children crying for help. I lifted my head and all I saw were scattered bodies."

Distraught families of the victims have begun the ordeal of identifying burned body parts, which have been taken to a Madrid congress centre. Only 39 of the 153 bodies have been formally identified.

The crash is the deadliest in Spain since 1983, when a Boeing 747 crashed in Madrid, killing 181 people.

The flight operator Spanair said that the plane had been taxiing for take-off when the pilot Antonio Luna reported an air-valve, which regulates pressure in the engine, had overheated. The plane was then diverted to a maintenance shed for about an hour.

Passengers were warned they could have to disembark and change planes, but they were kept onboard, despite reports that some passengers asked to leave the aircraft.

One woman said her husband had been forced to stay on the flight. The unidentified woman told Spanish media that her husband had texted her almost two hours before the incident saying, "My love, there's a problem with the plane."

When she suggested he get off, he replied, "They won't let me off."

Company technicians turned off the gauge, and the plane was then cleared for take-off. Spanair said this was done in compliance with standard procedure. According to one report, the plane was seen coming out of the maintenance shed just moments before its second attempt.

At this early stage, it is unclear whether the reported defect was a factor in the tragedy. Javier Mendoza, Spanair's deputy director, declined to comment on whether the problems that led to the initial take-off being aborted could have played a role in the crash.

Javier Fernandez Garcia, the flight coordinator at Barajas airport, told a Spanish newspaper that unspecified problems had kept the aircraft grounded on two previous occasions.

It was also disclosed that a sister plane of the one that crashed in Madrid had to make an emergency landing only a week ago after suffering suspected engine problems. That plane diverted to an airport in Gran Canaria after losing power in mid-air.

Public concern is mounting amid suggestions Spanair opted to fly despite detecting problems. "I'd kill the bastard who did this" was a typical reaction from a driver outside a makeshift morgue.

Amid this growing controversy the official investigation by Spanish authorities has begun. The two black box flight recorders have been recovered, though one is partially damaged. These contain the crucial dialogue between the pilots and air traffic control as well as all the telemetry data of the aircraft instruments. Footage taken by the Spanish civil air authority AENEAS is also being examined.

Chris Yates, aviation analyst for Jane's Information Group, says it could be some time before definitive answers can be found.

Speaking on the BBC website, he said, "Such engine fires are extremely rare, but when they do occur they are, invariably, the result of some form of mechanical failure."

Analysing the data and wreckage from the site is a long process, typically taking months to reach a conclusion.

Kieran Daly, the editor of *Flight International*, said it would be premature to speculate on the cause of the accident, but in the absence of dangerous weather conditions, a likely source of the problem could be inferred.

"Accidents on takeoff are relatively rare," he said. "The obvious suspicion is some kind of engine problem. The suspicion is that for whatever reason the aircraft had insufficient power to pull away."

The McDonnell Douglas MD-82, generally considered by industry experts to be a reliable though ageing workhorse, has a very low rate of accidents and incidents. Since coming into service in 1981, the MD-80 series has been involved in 11 serious crashes in a history of 20 million flights, making the plane one of the safest in the sky. It is commonly used on short trips around Europe.

Majorca-based Spanair, which has operated since 1988, is Spain's second biggest airline. Spanair is owned by parent company Scandinavian Airlines Systems (SAS).

Like many airlines operating on increasingly thin profit margins, Spanair has been struggling with high fuel prices and tough competition during the economic slowdown.

It recently announced it was laying off up to 1,200 staff, more than a quarter of its workforce, and cutting routes after losing US\$80 million in the first half of this year.

After a year of failing to attract any acceptable bids, SAS announced it would be forced to keep the subsidiary, which flies 371 daily departures between 36 airports, sending its share price tumbling.

SAS and Spanair executives appeared on national television to deny that safety had been sacrificed in its quest to cut costs, but the evidence produced so far is grounds for serious concern.

Just hours before the crash, Spanair's pilots threatened to strike over plans by SAS to cut costs. Representatives of the pilots' union, Sepla, said, "The organised chaos in which the company exists can't continue."

The pilots alleged that company bosses were forcing cockpit and maintenance staff to work abusively long hours, in order to compensate for "endemic problems" of organisation and structure.

These claims were backed up by a series of e-mails published by the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* and republished in the *Times* of London on Friday. These revealed how, in the months before the fatal crash, airline workers had repeatedly warned management that passenger safety was being put at risk, and described the airline's daily operations as a "disaster."

It quoted from an April 2007 e-mail to Lars Nygaard, then Spanair chief executive, by a union representative. It had warned, "The lack of resources and their quality on the ground, the repeated AOGs [grounded planes] in the fleet, the scarcity of crews and the system of movement of crew members mean that the general feeling is one of operational chaos that places the passengers at risk."

This was followed one month later by another letter from the union stating, "The operation continues to be a disaster and is getting worse by the day."

The union also complained that the older planes were not being replaced fast enough. In January, the union wrote, "The MD fleet has not been renewed in favour of A320s in the agreed timeframe."

It is not known how management responded to the concerns.



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