

Questions abound in aftermath of Air France crash

Stefan Steinberg
4 June 2009

On Wednesday, Brazilian military aircraft spotted debris in the Atlantic Ocean that experts have confirmed belongs to Air France Flight 447, which disappeared on Monday having taken off from Rio de Janeiro en route to Paris.

The Airbus A330-200 plane was carrying a total of 228 people. The victims of the tragic crash—the worst air disaster in the 75-year history of Air France—came from a total of 32 countries, including 61 French citizens, 58 from Brazil, and 26 from Germany, five of whom were from the same Stuttgart family.

The background to the crash remains very unclear. Definitive information regarding the causes of the crash can only be obtained by rescuing the plane's black box, which is likely to lie along with heavier parts of the plane up to 6,600 to 9,800 feet (2,000 to 3,000 meters) deep in the Atlantic Ocean.

The debris, including an airplane seat, a life jacket and a fuel slick, was spotted in the Atlantic some 650 kilometres (410 miles) north of the Brazilian island of Fernando de Noronha along the jet's scheduled flight path.

AF 447 was four hours into its 11-hour voyage to Paris when it suddenly issued a series of automated data alerts indicating multiple electrical and pressurization failures and ceased contact with controllers.

At the same time, the three experienced pilots at the helm of the plane did not issue any mayday distress call—a fact that aviation experts agree points to the plane being overwhelmed by a very sudden and catastrophic occurrence.

The flight was passing through a heavy trough of turbulence when the accident took place. This region of the Atlantic Ocean is notorious for its turbulent

equatorial weather, but the usual procedure on the part of air crews is to circumnavigate such storms. Experts have argued against initial claims that a lightning strike alone could have been the cause of the accident.

It is estimated that every jetliner is hit by a lightning strike on average one to two times a year, and it is rare for such incidents to end with any harm to the plane or its passengers.

There are more than 600 A330s in service with 72 operators around the world. They have flown a total of 13 million flight hours and 3.3 million flights. The planes are generally regarded as one of the safest of all aircraft and have been specially built to withstand lightning strikes. The AF 447 was just a few years old, and there were no indications of any technical problems at its departure airport in Rio de Janeiro.

For his part, French Defense Minister Herve Morin was quick to raise the possibility of terrorism. "We cannot, by definition, exclude a terrorist attack, because terrorism is the main threat for all Western democracies," Morin asserted. In fact, there is not the slightest evidence to indicate a terrorist attack. It remains unclear why hijackers would have selected such a plane for an attack, and no terror group has sought to claim responsibility.

A number of aviation experts have drawn attention, however, to a number of past incidents involving Airbuses. In 1994 a crash took place soon after take-off during Airbus flight trials, costing the lives of seven crew members, and in 2003 an Airbus owned by Hong Kong-based Dragonair airline lost height dramatically in severe turbulence, injuring 15 passengers.

Two more recent accidents also took place on Airbuses attached to the fleet of the Australian airline Qantas. On two occasions, last October and again in December last year, Airbus 330s reported problems

with their air data inertial reference units (adiru). The units, also known as “fly by wire,” permit the pilot to steer his plane electronically rather than by cable or hydraulic.

On the two occasions in Australia the adiru units reacted under turbulent conditions by indicating that the plane was undertaking a steep nosedive. The flight control computers in the two planes then took drastic compensatory measures to correct the plane’s flight path. It later emerged, however, that the adiru units had sent out false information, and it was only the rapid intervention of the plane’s crew that prevented a worse accident. Nevertheless, 14 people were seriously injured in the October incident.

Following the events in Australia, European authorities issued a global alert to A330 operators.

While much remains to be clarified about the exact circumstances of the catastrophic crash of AF 447, it should be considered that the tragic accident takes place at a time of fierce competition between rival major airlines and aircraft construction companies.

The current global economic slump has led to a dramatic fall in passenger numbers, particularly for long-haul routes. Airlines are under enormous pressure to implement cost-cutting measures, while scaling down the size of the aircraft they use for transcontinental flights. At the moment a ferocious commercial battle is taking place between US Boeing and the French-German Airbus company for future contracts. The sums involved are enormous. According to one recent report, Air France-KLM plans to finalize an order this year to purchase either 100 Airbus A350s or Boeing 787 Dreamliners. The total price for the long-haul aircraft is estimated at over US \$20 billion.

At the same time, Boeing is seeking to reassure customers that its own planes are safe following a recent NTSB safety report that criticized the safety standards of Boeing’s long-range 777 after the crash landing of a British Airways 777 at London’s Heathrow airport in January 2007.

The cost-cutting mentality that currently prevails in the airline industry was summed up by comments made yesterday by the head of the Ryanair company, Michael O’Leary. Announcing the first major losses in the history of the airline, O’Leary predicted for this year “a bloodbath in the industry.” O’Leary continued, “We will hopefully cause most of that, and the losers will be

British Airlines, easyJet and other high-fare airlines.”

O’Leary announced further plans for cost-cutting in his own fleet, including payment by passengers for using aircraft toilets, and declared that his company was “considering whether we might launch a takeover bid for Lufthansa or Air France just to knock them out.”

It is too soon to say whether cost-cutting measures on the part of airlines or aircraft construction companies played a role in this latest air disaster. The fact remains that the air industry as a whole is under intense pressure to cut corners and costs. This factor should be taken into account in any investigation of the causes of the Air France 447 tragedy.



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