Comoros air crash raises issue of safety standards

Peter Daniels
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The June 30 crash of a Yemeni airliner in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa has focused attention on the issue of air safety, especially in poorer sections of the world.

Yemenia Airlines Flight 626 was en route to Moroni, the capital of the tiny island nation of Comoros, situated between the east coast of Africa and the island of Madagascar. Most of the passengers were residents of Comoros, although the flight also included 66 French citizens, some of whom had dual nationality. They had boarded in Paris, picked up more passengers in Marseille and then changed planes in the Yemeni capital of Sana. The plane crashed in the sea near the Moroni airport.

The sole survivor of the disaster was a 12-year-old girl, Bahia Bakiri, who clung to wreckage for as long as 13 hours before being rescued. The plane went down in darkness, at about 2 a.m.

Comoros, a former French colony that has been independent since 1975, consists of three small islands and has a population of about 800,000. Half live in extreme poverty, on the equivalent of less than $1.25 a day. 200,000 Comorans live in France. Bahia's family lives in a suburb of Paris. The young survivor, who suffered only a broken collarbone and some lesser injuries, was with her mother, who was presumed lost in the crash, on her way to spend the summer with relatives. Bahia was flown back to Paris to meet her father. She also has three younger siblings, two, eight and ten years old.

Angry Comoran protesters demonstrated in Paris and in Marseille, where they clashed with the police. They said they had repeatedly complained about overcrowded and unsafe flights on Yemenia Airlines, which is jointly owned by Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

People who had flown on that route reported that there sometimes were no seat belts, and also that passengers had at times been forced to stand.

The crash took place in bad weather, and airline officials placed the blame for it on those conditions and not the plane itself. An Airbus 310, the aircraft had been in service since 1990 and had logged 17,300 flights. French officials claimed, however, that the aircraft had been banned from flying into France after failing a security inspection in 2007. Yemenia Airlines officials said that problems had been taken care of, and that the plane had passed an inspection in May and had flown to London as recently as a week before the crash.

The June 30 crash has been followed by angry finger-pointing by French politicians and European airline officials. Dominique Bussereau, France's transport minister, called for a worldwide blacklist system listing dangerous aircraft and airlines so that passengers are not endangered by "rubbish planes." French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner also issued a heated statement.

While the outrage of the Comorans and other passengers is obviously justified, the reaction of the French authorities may have something to do with the fact that this was the second crash involving France in less than a month. An Air France Airbus 330 went down in the Atlantic shortly after leaving Brazil for Paris on June 1, with the deaths of all 228 on board. While the authorities are now protesting, they had, according to Comoran passengers, ignored many earlier complaints.

Whatever the specific causes of this tragic accident, there is little doubt that air safety in poorer countries has lagged behind, and resulted in a higher rate of fatal crashes. In Africa one out of 250,000 flights results in a fatal accident, a rate that is five times higher than the

global average.

Safety concerns can be attributed to poor infrastructure, inferior safety training and standards, the age of the airliners and the adequacy of inspections. All of these issues can, in turn, be traced back at least in part to generalized poverty and financial pressures. Nor can there be any complacency on air safety in the major industrialized nations, despite the generally good record of recent years. The global economic crisis is certain to produce pressures to cut corners on safety in a thousand different ways.

The blacklist that the French officials are calling for would not solve the problem, especially for those who have no choice but to fly in the poorer countries. It has also been pointed out that even if the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations body that establishes safety standards, creates a blacklist, it would be national governments and authorities who would be empowered to enforce it. The answer to these problems is not that of erecting walls between "safe" and "unsafe" air travel, but instituting internationally coordinated and financed safety standards.

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