Indian air disaster kills 158

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Air India Express flight IX-812 from Dubai crashed at Mangalore airport on May 22, killing 158 of the 166 people on board. The aircraft apparently overshot the runway, careered down a forested slope and burst into flames. It was India's first major air disaster in a decade and the worst since 1996, when a mid-air collision between two passenger aircraft at Charkhi-Dadri killed 349 people.

Even before the aircraft's black box had been recovered, India's aviation minister Praful Patel told the CNN-IBN television news channel that a "human error" might have been responsible for the crash. Air India management also blamed "pilot error", claiming the pilot, Captain Zlatko Glusica, had failed to signal an emergency landing. Officials from the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), India's aviation regulator, also joined the fray declaring that the pilot had overshot the runway.

The blaming of the pilot, even before an investigation had begun, is a desperate attempt to deflect attention from the deficiencies of the state-run airline and of airport infrastructure. Air India has been cutting costs to avert a serious financial crisis, while Indian airports have been placed under stress as a result of burgeoning air travel both to and within India.

Questions have already been raised about Mangalore airport, which is perched on a hilltop with steep ravines on three sides. The runway on which flight IX-812 had been supposed to land was built in 2006 with an overall length of 2,400 metres. The Runway End Safety Area (RESA) of 60 metres was well short of the 240 meters recommended by International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) guidelines.

Writing in the *Times of India* on May 24, air safety expert Captain Mohan Ranganathan commented: "'After a crash, if the pilot is alive, nail him. If he is dead, blame him,' goes a saying in our circles. The blame game has already begun even as vital safety deficiencies get swept aside."

After noting that Air India management claimed Mangalore airport met ICAO standards, Ranganathan stated: "But the aiming point (the point where the undercarriage of the aircraft is supposed to touch down on the runway while landing) on the runway does not conform to ICAO standards. Also if the overrun area had 90 metres of sand laid out as per ICAO specifications for the runway-end safety area, then isn't it strange that the aircraft did not slow down?"

In a separate comment, Ranganathan suggested an engineered material arrestor system (EMAS), designed to stop a plane from overshooting the runaway, might have prevented the disaster at Mangalore airport. "Though expensive, EMAS can prevent damage to the aircraft and loss of human lives in case of an overrun," he said. The Airport Authority of India (AAI) has ruled out installing EMAS at its airports on cost grounds.

An article in the *Times of India* pointed out that Mangalore airport does not have approach radar to assist air traffic control to warn a pilot about altitude, speed and glide path. In the absence of approach radar, a pilot is on his own, using Instrument Landing System signals and his own judgment. Ideally a busy airport should have two radars—an approach radar and a secondary surveillance radar. "While countries across the world are aiming at complete radar coverage, India seems to be still in the dark ages as radar infrastructure has not matched the air traffic growth. A majority of small airports in the country do not have a radar at all," the article commented.

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The Indian Commercial Pilots Association has also raised questions about pilot fatigue. In 2008, DGCA rolled back the rest rules it had set the previous year to ensure pilots had more time off between lengthy or tiring assignments, like roundtrip international flights. Two Indian pilots told *India Real Time* that the decision was taken for commercial reasons: the heavy demand for pilots in the growing aviation sector meant airlines couldn't afford to give pilots as much rest.

A retired Air India pilot pointed out that while the regulations on Flight and Duty Time Limitations [FDTL], issued in December 1992, prescribed a flying time of nine hours and 12 hours of duty time (inclusive of flying time), they did not take into account the time-of-day factor. "Flying during the night--on a graveyard shift--is not the same as flying during the day, when the human body can remain alert longer," he said.

Obviously concerned about the growing public debate over the crash, Air India management issued a gag order on May 24 banning airline employees from speaking to the media about the Mangalore disaster or any safety-related matter and warned of disciplinary action. Bluntly outlining its motivations, management declared that such statements by employees could harm the "company's image" and "revenue earning prospects".

Around 20,000 Air India employees, nearly 60 percent of the airline's staff, launched a strike on May 25, to oppose the gag order and delays in salary payments. Some 140 flights were affected. The following day, management obtained a court order from the Delhi High Court against the continuation of the strike. After the two unions involved caved in and called off industrial action, Air India backed by the government sacked 58 employees, suspended another 24 and de-recognised the unions (see: "Air India unions call off 'flash' strike in face of state repression").

Air India is in serious financial difficulties despite a government infusion of 8 billion rupees ($US 173 million) to prop up the airline. According to the *Hindustan Times*, the airline's overdraft is 185 billion rupees and it owes 230 billion rupees for its aircraft acquisition program. This will rise still further with the planned purchase of the Boeing 787 Dream Liner.

Air India is under pressure from the government to slash costs and boost revenue. A parliamentary committee report in March summed up the company's situation following the merger of Air India and Indian Airlines: "Almost two years after the merger, the company is plagued by serious survival issues including a huge financial loss, no real integration taking place, a disenchanted workforce, gross mismanagement regarding operations under different codes and a massive debt following an ambitious fleet acquisition plan."

The attempts by the airline and the government to suppress employees from speaking out after the Mangalore crash is clearly aimed at preventing any serious examination of the way in which its operating procedures, together with inadequate airport facilities, contributed to the disaster.

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