

Safety concerns after Lagos plane crash kills 170

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8 June 2012

Just before 4 p.m. on June 3, a passenger plane crashed into a built-up area of Lagos, Nigeria, killing all 153 people on board. The 146 passengers, a flight engineer, two pilots and four cabin crew members included US and Chinese citizens.

The aircraft came down in a densely populated neighborhood alongside the approach path of the Murtala Muhammed international airport. The plane crashed through a two-storey building and ploughed into a woodworking studio, a printing press and apartments, killing between 16 and 30 people on the ground. Those killed included a young girl and a mother holding her baby.

Among the passengers was Maimuna Anyene from West Hartford, Connecticut, who died along with nine other members of her family: her husband, four children, her sister, her two cousins and her mother-in-law. Maimuna was visiting Nigeria with her children for the first time. Farida Kaikai was a young Nigerian employee at the Aso Savings Mortgage Bank in Abuja and was visiting Lagos for training.

“We heard a huge explosion, and at first we thought it was a gas canister,” said eye-witness Timothy Akinyela, 50. “There have been too many crashes in Nigeria. We need the government to name and shame the airlines so that they are forced to sit up,” said Sherif Anyepi, to cheers from those around.

Although the investigation into Sunday’s crash has only just begun, it seems likely that it was due to a mechanical failure. Just before the crash, the pilots had contacted the Lagos control tower to report engine problems, according to a military official.

It was Nigeria’s fourth such major crash in the past decade and the worst since January 22, 1973, when a Nigerian passenger plane went down with the loss of all 176 passengers and crew in the northern provincial

capital of Kano.

After a number of plane crashes in 2005, the government made several changes to its air safety systems, introducing more modern passenger-scanning equipment and improving its airport radar systems. This allowed Nigeria to achieve the Federal Aviation Administration’s highest rating, meaning that its commercial aircraft could land at US airports from 2010 onwards.

However, Nigeria’s decaying infrastructure and other problems have meant that the improvements were not as effective as the FAA had claimed. Power outages occur frequently, closing air traffic control systems for hours. The outages disable the radar screens and cause delays for both takeoffs and arrivals. Even more importantly, the age of Nigeria’s air fleet is a major issue. Many Nigerian planes are more than 20 years old and are at the end of their useful lifespan. Dana Air had been considered one of the safer domestic airlines, yet the average age of its fleet is 21.4 years and its newest plane is 20.9 years old, according to Planespotters.net. For comparison, the average age of the US domestic fleet is around 13 years.

Africa has the lowest air traffic rate in the world, with only 3 percent of the population travelling by plane, but the highest airline accident rate, with 17 percent of global accidents, according to statistics from the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

Since the period of deregulation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there has been a succession of private companies competing for business in Nigerian airspace. By 1995, the number of licensed Nigerian air carriers had reached 144, most of which no longer exist. Often, the airlines expanded quickly but got into so much debt they went out of business. The three regulatory agencies have done little if anything to control the

chaos. In December 2010, the AllAfrica web site reported a Nigerian government ruling that no aircraft over 20 years old would be allowed in Nigerian airspace. It is clear that this ruling was never enforced.

Aviation databases have shown that the plane that crashed on Sunday was exported from Alaska Airlines to Nigeria in early 2009. It had already suffered two incidents before it was exported. On November 2, 2002, the plane had to make an emergency diversion due to smoke and an electrical smell in the cabin. On August 20, 2006, the plane was evacuated after landing at Long Beach, California, because of smoke in the passenger cabin. Much of the wiring was found to be faulty. Due to doubts about its air worthiness, Alaska Airlines then kept the aircraft grounded until September 2008 to carry out maintenance.

In February 2009, the aircraft was sold to Nigeria. During use in Nigeria, the plane made an emergency landing in Lagos on April 19, 2010, due to loss of engine power after takeoff.

On Saturday night, one day before the disaster in Lagos, a Nigerian cargo airliner belonging to Lagos-based Allied Air Cargo overshot the runway in Accra, the capital of Ghana. The plane crashed into a bus full of passengers and killed 10 people.

The owners of Dana Air are based in India. The company is centred on the Murtala Muhammed Airport in Lagos, having flown its maiden flight from there to Abuja in November 2008. It grew rapidly and has been operating more than 18 domestic flights every day. The Dana Air website states that it was named Best Safety and Security Conscious Airline in Nigeria at the Security Watch Africa Awards in 2010.

Dana Air cancelled all flights on the Monday after the accident. In a bid to rescue the tattered credentials of its airlines, the federal government then withdrew the company's operating licence, citing "safety operational reasons." It has been widely recognised since the crash that it was a foreseeable consequence of the poor state of the aircraft. Even Senator Ahmed Makarfi of the ruling PDP stated that the airline and regulatory agencies could have avoided the crash by living up to their responsibilities. "The warning signals were there to indicate how delicate the aircraft was but somebody must have certified it airworthy," he said.

Anyone familiar with the Nigerian state and government knows that it is not just the aircraft

regulatory agencies who have been fiddling while the Nigerian workers and poor suffer, but that the whole system is rotten to the core.



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