

# Tragic plane crash that killed Chapecoense soccer team tied to cost-cutting

Rafael Azul

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The crash of the LAMIA 993 flight that killed 71 passengers and most of the players of the Chapecoense soccer team was an accident waiting to happen, resulting from decisions that placed cost-cutting before players' safety.

Whenever they referred to Chapecoense, sports commentators used words such as “modest” and “humble.” None of its players, a combination of new talent and experienced veterans (the oldest, team captain Cléber Santana, was 35, the youngest, Guilherme Giménez, was 21) had ever been selected to play on Brazil's national team.

That Chapecoense reached the finals of the South American teams cup, beating strong South American rivals, such as Argentina's San Lorenzo, was considered extraordinary.

The team took its name from the City of Chapecó in the southern state of Santa Catarina, a working class agro-industrial city of 200,000, a center of Brazilian meatpacking and food processing industries.

On Monday, the airplane that was carrying them to their game crashed some 50 kilometers from Medellín, Colombia, virtually wiping out the team, its support staff and team executives, and crew members. A total of 71 out of the 77 passengers and crew on the charter jet transporting the players died in the crash.

Out of the six survivors, goalie Danilo, who was 31 years old, survived but later died from his wounds. Jackson Follman, a substitute goalie, survived, but had to have a leg amputated. Two other team members who survived were defenders Alan Rushel, 27, and Neto, 30. Also surviving were sports reporter Rafael Val Morbida, and crew members Ximena Suárez and Erwin Tumiri.

The investigation into the cause of the crash is ongoing. A transcript of the pilot's desperate call to the

Medellín control tower published by the Madrid daily *El País* has the pilot declaring that the airplane was out of fuel, and going into electrical failure. Despite the air traffic controller's efforts, communication was suddenly lost, and the plane went down, some eight miles from the Rionegro airport, 34 miles from Medellín. A surviving crew member, Ximena Suárez, confirmed that all the lights on the plane had gone out right before the crash.

The team was originally to have arrived in Medellín in a chartered Airbus 320, from São Paulo but, due to a change in plans demanded by Brazilian authorities, supposedly due to legal impediments, the team flew to Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia) where they boarded a chartered airplane, a British-made Avro Jet Regional 85 (RJ85), a short-range jet owned by LAMIA, a small Venezuelan company that operates two charter jets (both RJ85) out of Bolivia. Though they have a limited operational fuel range (some 2,000 miles), the LAMIA RJ85s are routinely used by South American football teams due to the low rental cost—60 percent of the normal rate.

According to a report by the Santiago daily, *El Mercurio*, at least one airline, SAM, a Medellín airline merged with Colombia's national carrier AVIANCA, abandoned the use of the RJ85 and RJ100, due to poor performance, in 2010. This model of airplane had been associated with 13 accidents and 200 deaths.

There is as yet no explanation as to why this airplane was used to cover the 2,265 kilometer trip from Santa Cruz to the Rionegro airport, near Medellín. Airline protocol requires that airplanes carry more fuel than needed in case of an emergency or unusual conditions. In this flight, the LAMIA plane encountered both, bad weather and being placed in a holding pattern at Rionegro.

It appears that as the LAMIA airplane was approaching Medellín, at 10 p.m. on Monday, another airplane came in for an emergency landing at Ríonegro, forcing the team to stay up in the air longer than anticipated; 10 minutes later, having circled the airport twice, the LAMIA pilots declared an emergency. By then it was too late.

The Chapecoense tragedy is much more than a combination of bad judgment and bad luck; it took place in the context of a crisis in air transportation. Since the turn of this century, more than 40 airlines have filed for bankruptcy protection in North America alone, including companies such as Northwest Airlines, Mexicana, and Air Canada. Some, like Mexicana, ceased operations altogether, others were merged with other companies, such as Northwest and Delta.

Airlines around the world have not been able to recover from the Great Recession of 2007-2008 and, under pressure from their Wall Street creditors, have resorted to cost-cutting measures such as slashing wages and working conditions, eliminating jobs and outsourcing, compromising the safety of air travel and increasing public distrust.

The situation is the same in Latin America; those struggling airlines that have been unable to merge with or be acquired by stronger ones such as AVIANCA and LAN, have shut down (Aviacsa, Mexicana, Avolar, Alma). Other major airlines, such as Aerolíneas Argentinas, and Brazil's Varig, have been in crisis on and off since the turn of this century.

The decision to send the Chapecoense team on a 2,265 kilometer flight in a BJ85 short-hop airplane is truly alarming; yet such decisions had become routine in South American soccer.

Soccer teams around the world have taken on more and more debt in response to increasing competition for players and trainers. This debt crisis has mainly impacted European teams, but for Brazil it has meant that major teams, such as Botafogo, Corinthians, and Atlético Mineiro, have ongoing problems paying their players on time. High levels of debt and the high cost of servicing it, has also affected smaller clubs, such as São Paulo's Portuguesa.

The collective debt of Brazil's major teams between 2010 and 2012 climbed from 2 billion to 3 billion reais, at the same time that their income doubled, according to a report by ItauBBA, a Brazilian hedge fund.

While the Chapecoense team has been able to manage its debt, the decision to resort to a high-risk, low-cost charter, which specialized in transporting soccer teams across South America, had become something truly routine. In itself it reflects the cost-cutting atmosphere that afflicts the football industry in Brazil and around the world. It was only a matter of time before a deadly crash would take place.



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