US grounds Boeing 737s involved in Indonesian, Ethiopian crashes

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On Wednesday, three days after a Boeing 737 Max 8 commercial jet crashed in Ethiopia, killing all 157 people on board, and governments all over the world had banned the Boeing 737 Max fleet, the United States ended its isolation and announced that it was grounding the planes indefinitely.

President Trump made the announcement Wednesday afternoon, hours after the last holdout besides the US, Canada, announced that it was joining Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America in banning the planes. Canadian Transport Minister Marc Garneau issued his statement after reports surfaced of at least 11 complaints about the recently deployed 737 Max planes having been logged by US professional aviators with the federal Aviation Safety Reporting System between April and December of 2018.

The position of Boeing and the US carriers that use its 737 Max jets—Southwest Airlines, American Airlines and United—backed by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), that the planes were perfectly safe and should continue flying, had become untenable. Sunday's crash, which occurred six minutes after takeoff from Addis Ababa airport, was doubly alarming because it appeared to follow the same pattern as the Lion Air crash last October of a Boeing 737 Max 8 jet that went down eight minutes after takeoff from the airport in Jakarta, Indonesia. That disaster likewise killed all passengers and crew, a total of 189 people.

Aviation experts believe the Lion Air jet plunged into the Java Sea after the aircraft gyrated between descents and ascents because an automated flight control system newly installed on the updated 737 model repeatedly pitched the nose of the plane downward and the pilots were unable to override it. After that crash, both Indonesian and US pilots said they had not been told about the new system and had not been trained in its use.

Boeing then announced that it would be adding a software patch to the system and amendments to the training manual for the plane. Those, however, are not due to come online until next month.

The CEO of Ethiopian Airlines said Tuesday that the pilot of doomed Flight 302, a senior aviator with thousands of flying hours logged with the airline, had radioed the control tower shortly after takeoff that he was experiencing "flight control problems" and requested permission to return to the airport.

In his statement Wednesday, Canada's transport minister Garneau said newly received satellite tracking data of the vertical path of the Ethiopian jet at takeoff and corresponding data from the Lion Air crash showed similar “vertical fluctuations” and “oscillations.”

In his announcement later on Wednesday, Trump said the grounding of Boeing 737 Max 8s and Max 9s (a longer version of the aircraft employed by United) would begin immediately. “The safety of the American people, of all people, is our paramount concern,” he said.

This is a transparent lie, since the Trump administration kept the planes in the air for days after countries around the world began grounding them and banning them from their airspace.

Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg issued his own statement making similar assertions and ignoring the fact that as of Tuesday evening—when the whole world with the exception of Canada and New Zealand had banned the jets—he was insisting that the planes were perfectly safe and would continue in operation. On Wednesday, he reversed course and said the company had taken the “proactive step” of grounding the 737 Max planes “out of an abundance of caution.”

Trump, who has hailed Boeing and Muilenburg as

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models of “America First” industrial power, and received praise from the Boeing CEO in return, went out of his way in his announcement to praise the firm. “Boeing is an incredible company,” he said. “They are working very, very hard right now and hopefully they’ll very quickly come up with the answer, but until they do, the planes are grounded.”

The reported complaints about the flight performance of the 737 Max logged onto the federal database by US pilots are highly revealing and troubling. In one, a captain reported an autopilot glitch that caused a nose-down situation, similar to what seems to have occurred in both the Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines crashes.

In another complaint, a first officer reported that the aircraft pitched nose down after the autopilot was engaged during departure. The plane was stabilized when the autopilot was disconnected.

A pilot on a November 2018 flight said it was “unconscionable” that Boeing, the FAA and the unnamed airline allowed pilots to fly without adequate training or documentation. He called the flight manual “inadequate and almost criminally insufficient,” and added that part of the plane’s flight system was “not described in our Flight Manual.”

Boeing, which under CEO Muilenburg has been engaged in a ruthless cost-cutting and job-cutting operation and a desperate war for markets and profits against European-based Airbus, introduced the 737 Max series in 2017 to counter Airbus’s more cost-efficient entry to the lucrative mid-range flight market, the A320neo. Boeing claimed that the 737 Max required virtually no new training for pilots who had flown earlier 737 models, making it cheaper for airlines to bring online.

The 737 Max has become the best-selling plane in the company’s 100-year history, accounting for up to 40 percent of the firm’s soaring profits. There are already some 370 of the planes in operation around the world, including over 70 in the US, and 5,000 more on order. Boeing stock, whose price has tripled since the election of Trump in November of 2016, accounts for 30 percent of the 7,000-point rise in the Dow since then.

The biggest US exporter, Boeing exerts immense influence on the US political system. Its political action committee donates large sums to both parties, including among its beneficiaries Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Last year the company spent $15 million in lobbying and employed more than a dozen lobbying firms. The acting defense secretary, Patrick Shanahan, is a former Boeing executive.

Government regulation of Boeing and the airline industry as a whole has become little more than a sham after decades of deregulation. The gutting of government controls over the airlines and manufacturers was initiated by the Democratic Carter administration, with the passage of the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, a measure promoted by liberal icon Edward Kennedy. Since then, the lifting of controls, carried out in the name of encouraging competition and benefiting the consumer, has resulted in the monopolization of air travel to the point where four major carriers control 80 percent of US air traffic.

Particularly over the past decade, under Bush, Obama and now in an even more overt manner under Trump, federal regulators of the industry have become its vassals and protectors. The current transportation secretary, Elaine Chao, is a right-wing Republican, married to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. She served for two terms as secretary of labor under George W. Bush, during which time she gutted health and safety agencies such as the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA).

In 2005, the FAA introduced a new program whereby aircraft manufacturers like Boeing were allowed to choose their own employees to serve as FAA “designees” charged with certifying the safety of their commercial planes.

“It’s a very cozy relationship,” said Jim Hall, the former head of the National Transportation Safety Board. “The manufacturer essentially becomes both the manufacturer and the regulator, because of the lack of the ability of government to do the job.”

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