

Amid more damning revelations

Boeing CEO seeks to shift blame for deadly crashes onto pilots

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On Monday, exactly six months after Lion Air Flight 610, a Boeing 747 Max 8 jet, crashed 13 minutes after takeoff from Jakarta, and just over seven weeks after another 747 Max 8, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, crashed six minutes after takeoff from Addis Ababa, Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg held his first post-crash press conference.

A total of 346 passengers and crew members died in the two disasters, 189 in Indonesia and 157 in Ethiopia. Both crashes occurred under similar circumstances, when a faulty angle of attack sensor, which measures the pitch of the aircraft, fed false data to an automated anti-stall system called Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), which repeatedly forced the nose of the plane downward, overriding attempts by the pilots to bring the nose up and stabilize the aircraft.

Before the Indonesia crash, Boeing failed to even inform the air carriers or pilots of the existence of MCAS, which it had installed on its new 737 Max planes to compensate for a tendency in the updated 737, rushed onto market to compete with Europe-based rival Airbus' 320neo jet, to stall. Boeing marketed the new 737 with the claim that it was cheaper to put into service than the Airbus jet because it supposedly required virtually no additional training for pilots familiar with the older 737 models.

On March 13, following the Ethiopian Airlines crash, the entire fleet of 737 Max 8s and 737 Max 9s was grounded internationally, although Boeing and the US Federal Aviation Administration at first refused to go along with international authorities and continued to insist that the plane was safe.

The occasion for Monday's press conference was the

annual meeting of Boeing shareholders in Chicago, the headquarters city of the giant commercial jet builder and defense contractor. The event was contentious, with several reporters asking pointed questions about Boeing's obvious safety lapses and Muilenburg stonewalling, repeating talking points about a "chain of events" and "multiple contributing factors," defending the company's design and certification process, and finally implying that the pilots were to blame.

He repeatedly referred to the company's design and testing of a software patch it plans to install as soon as it is certified by the FAA, with the aim of getting its 737 Max planes—the company's best-selling model and the major driver of profits—back into service sometime this summer.

However, after taking questions from only six reporters, a grim-faced Muilenburg abruptly ended the news conference and walked out of the room, ignoring the shouted question: "Three hundred and forty six people died. Can you answer a few questions about that?"

In the course of the briefing, Muilenburg admitted that "a common link" in both crashes was activation of the MCAS system because of "erroneous angle of attack data." But he refused to acknowledge that the company had done anything wrong or that the 737 Max had any design flaws.

One question the company has not addressed is why it designed MCAS to be activated on the basis of data from a single angle of attack sensor. The standard design for systems that are critical to the safety of a commercial aircraft has always included some form of redundancy, so that the malfunction of a single sensor does not lead to disaster.

The *Wall Street Journal* revealed the same morning in a front-page exclusive report that Boeing never told its air carrier customers or its pilots that it had deactivated for the 737 Max aircraft a safety feature found on previous 737s that warns pilots when the plane's two angle of attack sensors are sending conflicting data. The absence of an "AOA disagree alert" on the Max model is particularly dangerous because, unlike the earlier versions, on the Max model, with MCAS, such a malfunction can suddenly pitch the plane's nose downward.

The preliminary report released last month on the Ethiopian Airlines crash stated that it took more than four minutes for the pilots to realize that incorrect data from one of the AOA sensors was prompting MCAS to push the jet's nose down.

The *Journal* also reported that FAA safety officials responsible for Southwest Airlines' 737 Max 8 fleet had discussed grounding the carrier's Max jets last December after learning that the AOA disagree alert had been deactivated.

For its Max fleet, Boeing, evidently to make more money, activated the alert only as part of a package of additional safety features for which air carriers had to pay extra.

At the press conference, one reporter asked if Muilenburg, who made nearly \$18.5 million in 2017, had considered resigning. Another reporter asked: "Why did you put an MCAS system in place in the planes without notifying the airlines or the pilots and why did you not tell the pilots that the angle of attack disagree warning light was deactivated?"

Muilenburg replied by denying that MCAS was a separate system that required additional pilot training.

Another reporter raised the reliance on a single AOA sensor to control MCAS and noted that whistleblowers at Boeing and the air carriers had said there were problems with the certification process and with MCAS. When Muilenburg suggested there was pilot error, saying, "These airplanes are flown in the hands of pilots..." the reporter noted that MCAS was "activated 21 times, pushing the nose of the plane down to the point of an unrecoverable dive."

To this, Muilenburg responded by saying the checklist "refers to cutoff switches" and adding, "In some cases those procedures were not completely followed."

A reporter responded by noting that the Ethiopian Airlines pilots had followed Boeing's protocol but were still unable to gain control of the plane.

A *Seattle Times* reporter then said: "Forget about the process. The final design of MCAS was deeply flawed and your engineers are fixing it and testing the fix today. Fixing very specific flaws, which are clear in the flights. So can you admit that the design was flawed?"

Shortly thereafter, Muilenburg ended the press conference and stalked off of the stage.

The network evening news reports sought to present Muilenburg and Boeing in the best possible light, hinting at pilot error. The Boeing CEO has been a darling of Wall Street. Since becoming chief executive and chairman in 2015, he has carried out a ruthless cost-cutting drive, slashing the workforce by nearly 7 percent in 2016 and another 6 percent in 2017. He has also squeezed Boeing suppliers, demanding price cuts of 10 percent or more, leading to intensified attacks on the suppliers' workers.

The 737 Max 8 accounted for 30 percent of Boeing profits, which grew 24 percent in 2018 to \$10.5 billion. The company's stock has nearly tripled since Trump's election, accounting for more than 30 percent of the increase in the Dow since then. Boeing set company records for earnings, cash flow and commercial deliveries in 2017 under Muilenburg.

However, the company's stock has lost 10 percent since the Ethiopian Airlines crash, new orders for the 737 Max's have dried up and the company recently announced a \$1 billion write-off for expenses connected to the fallout from the two crashes. It has also suspended a planned stock buyback. If Muilenburg is in trouble, it is not because his policies have contributed to the death of 346 people, but because he is seen to be costing big investors and banks anticipated profits.



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