

Investigation into Japanese plane crash exposes safety flaws

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In the aftermath of the plane crash on January 2 at Japan's Haneda Airport in Tokyo, an investigation into the causes has revealed the lack of safety measures that could have prevented the accident. One can predict in advance that whatever is finally done to address the issues will be limited and used to whitewash the fact that safety standards are subordinated to the pursuit of profit.

The accident occurred on Haneda's Runway C when an inbound Japan Airlines (JAL) Airbus A350 struck an outbound Coast Guard Bombardier DHC-8 aircraft. All 379 of the passengers and crew on the JAL plane survived even as it erupted into fire. However, five of the six people on the other aircraft were killed while the pilot was seriously injured. The Coast Guard plane was carrying supplies to the earthquake-stricken Ishikawa Prefecture.

The immediate cause of the crash appears to be miscommunication between the Coast Guard pilot and the air traffic control tower. Investigators believe that the pilot misinterpreted a command that labelled his plane "number 1." While this meant that the Coast Guard aircraft was the first plane waiting in standby to depart, it was not given clearance to enter the runway or to take off.

The pilot, however, likely believing he had been given the go-ahead, entered the runway and waited for approximately 40 seconds before being struck by the incoming JAL flight at around 5:47 p.m. None of the air traffic controllers noticed the Coast Guard plane on the runway prior to the crash. Having given the order to wait, the air traffic controllers were not required to directly monitor activity on the runway as they performed other duties.

In response to the crash, the head of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT)

Tetsuo Saito claimed on January 9, "We at the Transport Ministry are determined to go all out to take measures to ensure the safety and security of aviation." This includes measures for air traffic controllers, who are employed by Japan's Civil Aviation Bureau, a division of MLIT.

The ministry announced that it has ordered air traffic controllers to stop using the term "number 1" for planes on standby in order to avoid confusion. In addition, a new position will be created within air traffic control towers responsible for monitoring activity on runways at all times. MLIT also plans to repaint runways at major airports to improve visibility.

However, Saito's assertions that the Transport Ministry will "go all out" ring hollow, with the new safety measures only papering over problems, rather than fully addressing them. The ministry's stance ignores the fact that, as is the case so often in deadly workplace accidents, the root cause can be traced back to cost-cutting measures.

The January 2 crash was far from an isolated incident. Prior to this, there had been 23 reported cases of runway incursions deemed "serious" across airports in Japan since 2014 that nearly led to accidents between planes or other airport vehicles.

The Transport Ministry also revealed on January 7 that stop bar lights on the runway had been out of service for maintenance since April. These lights alert pilots when it is safe to enter a runway. A red stop bar is turned on until a plane is given clearance to take off, at which point green lights in the centre of the taxiway are activated to direct pilots.

MLIT attempted to deflect blame by stating that the lights are only used when visibility falls below 600 meters and this was not the case in the lead-up to the crash. However, since the lights had been out of

operation since April, even in poor visibility they could not have been used.

These lights are an important part of airport safety regardless of visibility. The Convention on International Civil Aviation, which sets the rules for international air travel, states that stop bar lights “can form part of effective runway incursion prevention measures.”

The lack of lights was likely a cost-cutting measure. Yoichiro Hatta, a retired JAL pilot, told the *Asahi Shimbun*, “(The routine use of the lights) will increase costs and the workload of air traffic controllers, but it is necessary never to repeat such an accident.” He added that the lights are useful for pilots flying out of airports with which they are less familiar.

Furthermore, MLIT has made clear that the new runway monitoring role in control towers will not include hiring more staff, thus adding additional duties to the current air traffic controllers rather than increasing their numbers to ensure better surveillance. The Japan Transport Safety Board is planning to investigate the working conditions of the air traffic controllers, though this will almost certainly end in a cover-up. The job is already very stressful.

Airport staff in general are overworked. At the end of November, a labor union representing ground workers at a number of airports throughout Japan, including Haneda, threatened to break their contracts, citing overwork. “We do not have the capacity to accept the current number of flights,” stated Masaki Arashiro, the head of the union. “We need to reduce the number of flights we handle.”

Haneda is already one of the world’s busiest, with planes taking off or landing at an average rate of 1.5 per minute. The volume will only grow as Japan plans to expand the number of flights around the country to two million, up from 1.8 million, by 2025. This necessitates an expansion of personnel, including air traffic controllers and ground crew, to handle the increase. However, this is not taking place.

The accident demonstrates a disregard for safety while companies like JAL boost the number of flights to accommodate increasing numbers of foreign visitors. Japan has pushed for developing tourism as a means of generating profits for big business while Tokyo has torn up all safety measures in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is also noteworthy that as profit-driven and cost-cutting measures are implemented, record amounts are being spent on preparations for war against China and Russia to meet the demands of Japanese imperialism. It is a stark demonstration that even basic safety measures are incompatible with capitalism.



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