

Indonesian air crash points to declining safety standards

By Dragan Stankovic
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On September 5, a Mandala Airlines' Boeing 737-200 crashed just after take-off into a crowded residential neighbourhood of the north Sumatran port city of Medan, Indonesia's third largest city. At least 102 crew and passengers were killed, as well as 47 local residents.

The aircraft was carrying a total of 117 passengers and crew. Among the dead were the governor of the province of North Sumatra and his predecessor. The toll is the highest since Indonesia's worst air disaster in September 1997, when a Garuda Airbus A-300B4 crashed in a mountainous area near Medan, killing all 222 passengers and 12 crew.

Fifteen people in the tail section of the plane survived this month's crash. One of the survivors, Rohadi Sitepu, told Metro Television: "The plane actually had taken off, but somehow it started to shake heavily and swerved to the left and then wham, a ball of fire came from the front of the plane toward the end."

The plane came down in the heart of a residential area just 500 metres from the runway, setting homes, cars and motorbikes on fire. A local reporter told Reuters: "I arrived around 10 minutes after the accident. Burning bodies were everywhere. Around 10 houses were burned, along with five to six minibuses. The plane was torn into pieces—we could only see the tail."

A five-year-old girl walking to school was among those killed. Many of the dead were taken to Medan's Adam Malik hospital and laid out on plastic sheets under a tent in the grounds. Relatives tried to identify the bodies, but most were burned beyond recognition. One woman could only recognise her sister by a bangle and her ring.

It is likely that Mandala will be compelled to pay just \$5,000 in compensation to the families of the dead and

\$2,500 to those who were injured.

Air disaster investigators from the US are working with local officials. The flight recorders have been sent to Washington for analysis. No problems have been reported in the plane's communications with the control tower. The weather was fine and visibility good. Setio Raharjo, head of the investigating team from the Indonesian National Transport Safety Committee, stated on September 7 that a preliminary probe had found a fuel problem with one of the plane's engines.

Indonesia is rated Category 1 by the US Federal Aviation Administration's International Aviation Safety Assessment Program, which means that meets International Civil Aviation Organisation standards. These standards stipulate the monitoring and control of airline operations, aircraft maintenance, pilot training and licensing, and minimum required equipment on aircraft.

However, the September 5 crash, which is the third major air disaster in less than 12 months, raises serious questions about the safety of Indonesian airlines. There have been 14 air accidents in Indonesia so far this year and more than two dozen since early 2004.

The same day as the latest crash, a Garuda plane flying to Medan from Jakarta was forced to make an emergency landing at Pekanbaru, Riau. The following day, another Mandala aircraft returned to Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport after 10 minutes due to problems with its landing gear warning lamps. On September 8, a Batavia Air Boeing 737-200 en route to Medan from Jakarta was forced to make an emergency landing at Palembang. On September 9, a light aircraft operated by the Dirgantara Air Service crashed in Kalimantan province.

Mandala Airlines was founded in 1969 and is 90

percent owned by Kostrad, the Indonesian army's strategic reserve command. The Indonesian armed forces (TNI) have a vast business empire. Current Kostrad chief Major General Hadi Waluyo admitted that the company had been in financial difficulties over the past two years, but said this had nothing to do with the disaster.

Last year, the Indonesian parliament passed a law ordering the military to divest of all its businesses by 2009. Kostrad has been preparing to sell the airline but it has been losing market share. To attract customers and thus boost its attractiveness to private buyers, Mandala has slashed its fares. A one-way fare from Medan to Jakarta is \$45, less than half what Garuda, Indonesia's largest carrier, charges for the same trip.

To cut costs, the airline pushed its aircraft to the limit. The Boeing 737-200 that crashed was built in 1981. It was one of 10 bought in 1994 by the Suharto regime from German carrier Lufthansa for \$US90 million to bolster the country's airlines and tourism. Even at the time, there were media reports warning that the aircraft were either ageing or surplus.

The situation is similar throughout the Indonesian airline industry. There are 20 registered airlines, most of which operate on thin margins. Several were established only in the last five years in response to rising demand for air travel. In 2004, approximately 25 million Indonesians used airlines—a 40 percent increase over the year before. In a climate of cutthroat competition and soaring fuel costs, most carriers are using old planes to keep costs down.

Following the latest crash, Indonesian officials went into damage control. Legislators convened a special parliamentary hearing to discuss airline safety. Transport Minister Hatta Radjasa blamed corrupt officials for allowing safety standards to be flouted and announced that random checks would be carried out to ensure aircraft were being properly maintained.

From December, Indonesian airlines will be required to limit aircraft to a maximum of 30 years service and 50,000 flight hours. Previous regulations set a limit of 35 years and 70,000 flight hours. The Boeing 737-200 that crashed was 24 years old and had flown more than 50,000 hours. It reportedly had undergone a full service in June.

Over the weekend of September 10-11, random safety checks led to the grounding of four Boeing

737-200s, operated by four different airlines. One aircraft had a problem with its wheel system. Another had a problem with its brakes. The faults with the other two were not disclosed.

Despite these limited new measures, there is no doubt that profit will continue to take priority over safety with further tragic consequences.

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