

Evidence mounts of safety violations contributing to AirAsia plane crash

By Will Morrow
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The more information that comes to light about AirAsia flight QZ8501, which crashed in the Java Sea on December 28 killing all 162 people on board, the more apparent it becomes that grossly inadequate operating procedures and safety standards contributed to the disaster.

Among the damning revelations is a memo sent by Indonesia's national weather monitor, the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG), to the Indonesian government on December 31. Leaked and published by local media several days later, it stated that the pilots on the AirAsia flight could not have received the latest weather report from the agency prior to take-off.

BMKG head Andi Sakya told the January 4 *Jakarta Post* that "AirAsia took the [updated BMKG] weather report at 7.00 a.m." The flight, however, had taken off from Surabaya International Airport in Indonesia at 5.35 a.m., because the airline shifted its departure time forward by two hours.

The plane crashed as it was travelling through a collection of intense, high-altitude thunderstorms on its route from Surabaya to Singapore. At 6.12 a.m., the pilots requested permission to increase their altitude due to violent storm conditions. The aircraft vanished from radar at 6.17 a.m., 42 minutes after taking off.

Ruth Hanna Simatupang, a former investigator for the National Transportation Safety Committee (NTSC), told the *Jakarta Post* that pilots are required to obtain up-to-date weather reports from the BMKG at least ten minutes before take-off. "According to standard procedures, every time pilots chart flight plans, they must consider BMKG weather reports," she said. In this case, the pilots could only have been considering weather reports supplied to AirAsia hours before.

This follows the Indonesian government's

acknowledgement last week that it does not mandate airlines to have a flight operations officer brief pilots on weather information prior to take-off. In other words, it allows the airlines to transfer onto the pilots all responsibility for recommending the cancellation of a flight if the weather is extreme, creating the conditions in which a single error of judgment can lead to catastrophe.

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote on January 5: "In places such as North America and Europe, dispatchers assemble weather information, route forecasts, detailed flight plans and fuel calculations for pilots." Joseph Miceli, president of the Airline Dispatchers Federation, a volunteer association of flight dispatchers based in Washington, told the *Journal* that the pilot-dependent approach would be unacceptable in the US.

In an attempt to deflect attention from its own culpability in the disaster, the Indonesian government on December 31 sent a circular to airlines mandating compulsory pilot briefings. Former NTSC investigator Hanna Simatupang told the *Jakarta Post* that "there's nothing new about the policy. It's a standard that's been applied regularly in the world. It is just one of the problems in the jungle of our aviation system... During my experience as an investigator, there were cases where the approval to fly from aviation authorities to airlines was given through a text message, without proper examination of flight papers."

Last Friday, Indonesian authorities also revealed that AirAsia did not have permission to fly the route from Surabaya to Singapore on Sundays, the day the flight occurred, and as a result has suspended all AirAsia rights to fly that route. In an effort at damage control, the Transportation Ministry announced on Monday that Transport Minister Ignasius Jonan had ordered Surabaya International Airport and the state navigation

operator Airnav Indonesia to suspend all officials deemed responsible for allowing the flight to take off without permits.

The fact that the flight did not have authority to depart is particularly significant given the circumstances of the crash. There were six other aircraft in the vicinity of flight QZ8501 when it crashed. The other aircraft, however, were cruising at an altitude of more than 34,000 feet, while, for reasons that have not been explained, QZ8501 was flying at 32,000 feet.

Five minutes before disappearing from radar contact, the pilots requested to increase their altitude to 38,000 feet, a common manoeuvre to avoid severe turbulence. The request was denied because of the presence of the other aircraft. Secondary radar data showed the plane was climbing steeply just before it went down, suggesting the pilots felt they needed to ignore the instruction.

The report that the pilot only requested to fly at a higher altitude mid-flight may itself not be accurate. According to an Agence France Presse article on January 4, “before take-off, [the pilot] Iriyanto had asked for permission to fly at a higher altitude to avoid the storm. But the request was not approved due to other planes above him on the popular route, according to Airnav.”

The Indonesian weather agency has suggested that the most likely cause of the crash was icing on the jet engines, a phenomenon that is not well understood. Experts have noted that the danger of icing depends upon the atmospheric presence of super-cooled liquid water droplets—which are pushed higher by the convective processes in thunderstorms—and that the chance of such droplets occurring decreases above a certain altitude. The higher the plane, in other words, the lower the danger.

It is not clear whether QZ8501’s lower altitude is the reason why the plane crashed. The question is raised, however, as to whether the unauthorised nature of the flight, as well as AirAsia’s decision to shift the departure time forward by two hours, impacted on the ability of the pilots to manoeuvre and avoid the storm.

The search for the remaining wreckage of the AirAsia flight is ongoing, after debris and some bodies were discovered on December 30. So far, 39 passengers’ bodies have been recovered but the flight’s “black

boxes”—and the record of what happened to the aircraft—have not.

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote yesterday that “some experts say they believe the plane’s boxes may be buried under silt, which could be blocking the signals from emergency locator transmitters.” Suyadi Bambang Supriyadi, the director of Indonesia’s Search and Rescue Agency, told the *Journal* that the black boxes could be moving with strong currents of 3.5–7.5 kilometres per hour. The signal on black box emitters only lasts 30 days.

Lengthy searches are the result of the refusal of airline corporations to pay for live satellite transmissions of all in-flight data, including audio recordings from inside the cockpit and to purchase readily-available satellite-based navigation systems which could be used to locate the plane.

Clearly reflecting popular hostility and suspicion in Indonesia toward the role of government regulators and AirAsia in the crash, the *Jakarta Globe* published an editorial on January 5, “Officials shouldn’t weather this storm.” It stated: “The fact is that the management of the Indonesian aviation system has for years been a dangerous life-threatening mess and urgently needs a total overhaul—from corrupt officials to obsolete technology and equipment... Like a time bomb, a deadly accident is bound to happen within such a messy system.”

Above all, what the disaster makes clear are the consequences of the subordination of air transportation and air safety to the immediate profit interests of international airline corporations.

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