

# In the wake of the Chapecoense tragedy, Bolivia arrests airline and government officials

By Rafael Azul  
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In the two weeks that have passed since 71 people, including 19 players of Brazil's Chapecoense football team, lost their lives in a tragic plane crash near Medellín, Colombia, the disaster has raised questions in the Bolivian media and political establishment on the government's links to the charter airline, LAMIA. In part to clear Bolivian President Evo Morales of any suspicion, the government launched its own investigation.

In a December 3 press conference calling for a government investigation, Morales made no secret of his close relationship with LAMIA's general manager, Gustavo Vargas Gamboa, who he has known from his days as a leader of the agricultural coca growers union in the 1990s. Vargas Gamboa also piloted Morales' presidential plane in 2006-2007. Morales promised to take "drastic measures" in response to the November 28 crash.

Last Friday, December 9, a Bolivian court ordered that Vargas Gamboa be held in prison while awaiting trial for negligence, cronyism, and transportation disaster. Vargas Gamboa, arrested on December 6, is a retired air force general. The arrest took place following a determination that the airplane that crashed had taken off with insufficient fuel to safely make the trip between Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and Medellín, Colombia. He is now under investigation for homicide.

Two days after detaining Vargas Gamboa, Bolivian authorities also arrested his son, Gustavo Vargas Villegas, a high-government official in charge of the National Registry of the Civil Air Command (DGAC); Vargas Villegas issued LAMIA's license to operate.

Vargas Villegas is being charged with neglect of his duties and for allowing his family connections to

influence the performance of his job.

Bolivian authorities are also seeking the extradition of Celia Castedo, who fled to Brazil following the crash. It appears that Castedo, who worked in air traffic control, signed off on the flight plan of the ill-fated LAMIA 2933 flight. Bolivian officials charge that Castedo had the authority to prevent the airplane from taking off and was negligent in not doing so.

Castedo has insisted that the sole authority to stop the flight rested with the Bolivian civil aviation agency. She claimed that she had told superiors the flight should be canceled but had been told to keep quiet.

The government also issued an international order of arrest against Marco Antonio Rocha, a LAMIA owner. In the wake of the tragedy, Rocha refused to return to Bolivia from Paraguay.

For his part, Bolivia's defense minister Reymi Ferreira accused the pilot of the LAMIA flight of murder for ignoring regulations and for negligence; the pilot, Miguel Quiroga, died in the crash. Ferreira pointed out that Quiroga's flight plan included a refueling stop in the Bolivian airport of Cobija, roughly one third of the way between Santa Cruz and Medellín; had the refueling stop taken place the Avro RJ-85 would not have run out of fuel and crashed on a mountain side just short of its destination.

This may have been only the first of Quiroga's errors. According to the Mexico City news journal *Proceso*, as soon as fuel reserves ran low, Quiroga had the option of landing in the Bogotá airport, but did not do so. Finally, Quiroga could have declared a "Mayday" emergency. Such a message to the Rio Negro airport air traffic controllers would have triggered an accelerated response that perhaps could

have saved the flight. Instead, the control tower placed the LAMIA plane on hold to prioritize another distressed flight.

Quiroga's decisions may have been motivated by the fact that, as co-owner of the small airline (three RJ-85 airplanes, two of them in repair), he was under financial pressure. Each of the decisions not taken would have involved a financial cost to LAMIA and to Quiroga himself. LAMIA's chief executive, Vargas Gamboa, in previous statements had made no secret that the airline confronted economic pressures.

Univisión, a US-based Spanish language TV network, has identified other LAMIA flights that had ended with fuel reserves well below the required fuel for 45 minutes' flying time. The very same plane that crashed on November 28 had gone through eight low fuel-reserve incidents. Univisión also found that some of those flights also exceeded weight limits.

Pilot and security expert Estaban Saltos told Univisión: "This reflects that systematic violations existed in nearly every flight." Saltos came to the conclusion that LAMIA "made it a practice to push their flights to the limit of fuel capacity."

Among the flights cited by Univisión is one on October 29, between Medellín and Santa Cruz (the same endpoints, in the opposite direction as the November 28 flight), ferrying the Atlético Nacional team to a game for the South America Cup.

From the beginning, the Medellín plane crash raised questions about the relationship between the administration of President Evo Morales and LAMIA. Six days after the crash, Morales' chief of staff, Juan Ramón Quintana, denied rumors that Vargas Gamboa had been rewarded with an operating license for LAMIA because he had been the president's pilot in 2006 and 2007. He also denied any ties between the president and LAMIA management and expressed surprise that Vargas Gamboa possibly had taken advantage of his family connections to unlawfully obtain an operating license for the airline.

Quintana declared that Morales did not know whether LAMIA was properly licensed when the president flew in one of its planes between the Bolivian cities of Rurrnabaque and Trinidad on November 16. He also denounced the right-wing opposition for "placing the blame" on the Morales administration for the issues surrounding LAMIA.

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