

Ethiopian Airlines tells Boeing, FAA to stop blaming dead pilots for 737 crashes

By Trévon Austin
20 May 2019

After the crash of two 737 Max aircraft within the space of five months, claiming the lives of 346 people, Boeing and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) officials are increasingly seeking to scapegoat the pilots who died trying desperately to overcome fatal flaws in the design of the new airplane and the failure of Boeing and the carriers to provide the pilots with adequate information and training.

At a House Aviation subcommittee hearing last week, Representative Sam Graves (Republican of Missouri) claimed that US pilots would have “successfully been able to handle” the emergencies on both Lion Air Flight 610, which crashed last October into Indonesia’s Java Sea, and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, which crashed on March 10 soon after takeoff from Addis Ababa.

Both planes gyrated wildly when an automated anti-stall system, the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), installed by Boeing to compensate for the tendency of its new short-haul plane to stall, repeatedly pushed the nose of the aircraft down, even when the pilots sought to lift the nose and fly manually. Neither the carriers nor the pilots had been informed of the existence of MCAS, which was not listed in the 737 Max instruction manual.

Graves added that the disasters “compound concerns about quality training standards in other countries.” He was seconded by other Republicans on the committee and by Acting FAA Administrator Daniel Elwell, whose agency essentially left certification of the 737 Max in Boeing’s hands. In keeping with the regulatory agency’s incestuous relationship with the world’s biggest builder of commercial aircraft and second biggest defense contractor, he sought to divert attention from Boeing’s actions, telling the committee that he “absolutely” wanted to “take a hard look at the training standards globally.”

He elaborated, declaring that the problem should have been “immediately recognizable” to the pilots, but that there was “apparent lack of recognition.” He accused the Indonesian pilots of failing to disable the anti-stall system and said the Ethiopian crew “didn’t adhere to the emergency we put out” and “never controlled their air

speed.”

In response to criticism of its pilots and training standards, made without any substantiation in the preliminary accident report on the Flight 610 crash, Ethiopian Airlines denounced the “effort that is being made to divert public attention from the flight control system problem of the airplane.” The airline added, “[T]he fact that the entire world has grounded more than 370 B737 Max 8 airplanes speaks loud and clear that the airplane has a problem.”

The airline’s response, sent via email by its manager of corporate communications, Asrat Begashaw, pointed out that Ethiopia has “the largest Aviation Academy in Africa with the most modern training devices and facilities of global standards,” which are accredited by international regulatory agencies.

“Ethiopian Airlines is among the very few airlines in the world and the only one in Africa which has acquired and operates the B737 Max 8 full flight simulator,” Begashaw noted. No US airline currently owns or operates a full flight simulator for the Max 8.

US pilot Patrick Smith, who has a pilot friend who knew one of the deceased pilots in the Ethiopian Airlines crash, also doubted claims that pilot error was a significant factor. According to the *Seattle Times*, he said in an email: “A friend of mine—an American—worked for several years as a training captain at Ethiopian. He knew the captain of the doomed flight and spoke very highly of him, describing him as an ‘excellent pilot’ and ‘always well-prepared.’”

“Ethiopian Airlines has a long, proud history with a perfectly respectable safety record, and its flight training academy is very well respected,” Smith added. “My suspicion is that pretty much ANY two pilots facing the same malfunction would have met with the same result.”

Two flight simulator tests replicating the conditions of the ill-fated flights also contradict claims that better trained pilots would have been able to avoid catastrophe. The latest issue of the magazine *Aviation Week* details a simulator test that re-created a critical part of the doomed Ethiopian flight. The simulation’s results indicate that the pilots “faced a

near impossible task of getting their 737 Max 8 under control.”

A US crew performed the simulation at a speed of 250 knots, compared to the more than 350 knots at which the Ethiopian jet was flying. But even at this lower speed, the forces on the plane’s tail left the pilots unable to move the manual wheel in the cockpit that would adjust the tail flaps and correct the tilting of the plane’s nose. The pilots were able to prevent a crash only by utilizing an old aviator technique, called the “roller-coaster” method, which has been absent from US pilot manuals for decades. Even using the old method and saving the aircraft in the simulation, the pilots lost 8,000 feet of altitude. But the Ethiopian flight was never able to rise to that altitude. Thus, it could not have been saved.

In his comments at the House hearing, Representative Graves was citing points in a report written by two pilots at a major US airline. The pilots stated that pilot error was “the most consequential factor” in the crashes. According to the *Seattle Times*, however, the report was commissioned and paid for by institutions with large holdings in Boeing stock.

Suggestions that pilot error was the major cause of the crashes will likely be central to Boeing’s legal defense in liability lawsuits, as well as any potential criminal prosecutions.

While a number of Republicans in the House Aviation subcommittee hearing barely sought to conceal their advocacy for Boeing, none of the committee members, including the Democrats, so much as hinted that the company or its executive should be criminally prosecuted in connection with the deaths of 346 people. This includes CEO Dennis Muilenburg, who was paid \$23 million last year for boosting the company’s profits and stock price since taking the helm in 2015. He achieved this in large part by carrying out a brutal cost-cutting drive, including the elimination of thousands of jobs, while simultaneously enriching big investors and speculators by overseeing billions in stock buybacks and dividend increases.

Rep. Rick Larsen, the Washington state Democrat who chairs the House Aviation subcommittee, spoke as a worried partisan of Boeing and the FAA. “The FAA needs to fix its credibility problem,” he said. “The committee will work with the FAA as it rebuilds public and international confidence in its decisions, but our job is oversight and the committee will continue to take this role seriously.”

The hearing was punctuated by minor criticisms that amounted to a slap on the wrist for those involved, according to mounting evidence, in gross negligence, at the very least.

Among the latest revelations is an audio recording of a November 2018 meeting between American Airlines pilots

union officials and Boeing Vice President Mike Sinnett concerning MCAS, which was obtained by CBS News. The union officials confronted the Boeing executive over the company’s failure to inform the pilots about MCAS.

“We flat out deserve to know what is on our airplanes,” one pilot is heard saying.

“I don’t disagree,” said Sinnett.

“These guys didn’t even know the damn system was on the airplane—nor did anybody else,” Michael Michaelis, the unions’ head of safety, declared. Sinnett, who did not appear to know he was being recorded, dismissed the pilots’ concerns, saying, “I don’t know that understanding this system would’ve changed the outcome on this. In a million miles, you’re going to maybe fly this airplane, maybe once you’re going to see this, ever.”

It was also reported last week that an internal FAA review of its jetliner certification process found that no senior agency official participated in crucial assessments of the MCAS system. According to the agency’s report, during the FAA certification process for the 737 Max, Boeing did not list MCAS as a system whose malfunction or failure could cause a catastrophic event.

FAA officials allowed Boeing officials to perform safety tests and analyses of potential hazards. According to sources familiar with the FAA’s investigation, Boeing employees who served as designated agency representatives signed off on the final design of the Max 737.

Under the FAA’s delegation system, airline companies such as Boeing can appoint people to work as “authorized representatives” within the FAA. A *Seattle Times* investigation earlier this month explained that designated representatives often faced internal pressure from the company, to which they reported their findings, rather than to the FAA.

The FAA report did not conclude that the agency was misled by Boeing but instead states further analysis of MCAS was not needed because the agency determined it did not alter the trajectory of the plane.

Shares of Boeing have more than tripled since the election of Donald Trump, making it the highest-priced stock in the Dow Jones Industrial Average. The company has accounted for more than 30 percent of the increase of the Dow since the conclusion of the 2016 presidential election.

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