



INSTILLING Culture

Care must be taken in viewing safety in the developing world not to assign blame too quickly, nor to assume that the lapses in adherence to proven safety procedures are the result of a pervasive disregard. This is the judgment of Paul-Louis Arslanian, director of France's Bureau d'Enquêtes et d'Analyses (BEA), the nation's accident investigation agency.

"There are two worlds of safety," he says. One world is "the classic Western world, pushing safety toward its present achievement, developing a culture of safety." The other is developing nations, where problems arise mostly when people from outside aviation come into the industry believing it to be just another business.

"In the developing world, you find excellent people with the proper culture, highly competent, some more competent than we have in [developed] countries because they have so many challenges to overcome," Arslanian says. "But these people usually are at the level of action, not at the level of decision."

Those people coming from outside aviation "are mercenaries, coming with just one logic — to make money. This logic is colliding with our safety logic."

Arslanian relates his experience investigating the Dec. 25, 2003, crash of a Boeing 727 attempting to take off from Cotonou, Benin, that killed 141 people. A group based in the United Arab Emirates bought the aircraft out of the U.S. desert that January. It was used by the owner under the guise of three different operators that year, registered successively in Afghanistan, Swaziland and Guinea. The operations manual, approved by Guinean aviation authorities months after operations began, lacked, the BEA accident report says, "a chapter on loading and balancing the aircraft."

The 727 was heavily loaded with a center of gravity far forward of limits when a takeoff was attempted on a hot day. The airplane had just left the ground at the end of the runway when its landing gear hit a small concrete building that housed navigation aids. The airplane veered left, crashed on a beach and slid into the ocean.

"The whole [Benin] government was totally concerned; none were saying, 'Well, this is just another accident.' They were aware that aviation is a must for their country, not only for the economic stimulation it brings, but also for opening their door to the world," Arslanian says.

When "mercenaries" cut corners, "the cheaters can take business away from

others. If we don't protect them from this sort of competition, [cheating] may become contagious, imitated just to gain the same efficiency.

"We must develop the [safety] culture. They have the training, they have money, what they need is culture, developing the team concept at the level of the workers and the level of the rulers. In Benin, we did not meet bandits in positions of authority. They just are isolated from normal world activities and it is not their fault, it is our fault."

There remains, Arslanian says, a need to punish the "bandits, but when we identify a failure we should do it the same way as in our safety culture — no blame, just correct the problem."

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Douglas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.