



NOT NEWER, Better

Sadly, there are times when we have no need to read the statistical tea leaves to predict developing safety hazards. Data tools, designed for an environment in which accident rates have fallen to such a low level that accidents are almost statistical anomalies, become unnecessary when airplanes actually crash and people are killed. Accidents in Africa spotlighted the huge needs of that region, and now we are seeing a similar cry for help from Indonesia.

A populous nation of many islands, Indonesia must rely on aviation to a much greater degree than nearly all other developing nations to allow its inhabitants free movement and to facilitate economic growth. While the nation's rather healthy economic development and new airline competition have increased traffic, its aviation system may not have kept pace.

The two most recent fatal crashes have, at this writing, undetermined causes. The investigation of the first, that of new entrant airline Adam Air, awaits the retrieval of cockpit voice and flight data recorders from the ocean floor, a wait that grows longer as the parties involved refuse to accept the financial responsibility for that expensive operation.

There should be no delay. The government should move quickly to secure the recorders so that the cause of the accident can be determined with a greater certainty, leaving the financial wrangling for the aftermath, when the time spent no longer threatens the development of a safety response.

Investigation of the second accident, involving national flag carrier Garuda Indonesia, is moving ahead at a good speed, leading to hope that a well-considered report will be forthcoming in the near future.

However, it is disturbing that Indonesian officials, who have proposed that aircraft over 10 years of age be replaced, are grasping at false solutions in a bid to quickly answer the public outcry. It may very well be that these older airplanes have been ill-maintained and need to be grounded, but a comprehensive inspection of the fleet is not, to our knowledge, the basis for the decree. Rather, the move relies on a public misconception that older aircraft are more dangerous than new aircraft in the same way dilapidated cars and trucks are more hazardous than new vehicles.

Aviation people know quite well that a well-maintained aircraft can fly safely for many decades, especially if its avionics are kept up to state-of-the-art standards.

In fact, the consequences of a blanket requirement to eliminate older aircraft in the name of improving safety are likely to be more bad than good. None of the region's airlines are rich; in fact, many are struggling, including debt-ridden, government-owned Garuda, as it faces new low-cost competition throughout the region. The forced replacement of older aircraft with newer aircraft will, at the very least, reduce air service capacity — unpopular and economically devastating for a nation so dependent on air travel. However, attempts to use other resources to soften the capacity crunch raise the possibility that something, somewhere, that is essential for safe operations will be cut.

In the long run, governments are better served by investing in their own staff and agencies to ensure that existing rules are enforced and guidelines are adopted, rather than micromanaging the commercial decisions of operators.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

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