

Community

The air safety situation in Brazil has been an issue since my first day on the job at the Foundation. Everything started unraveling with the midair collision between an Embraer Legacy and a Gol Boeing 737-800. Within hours, the highest levels of the Brazilian government engaged in outrageous finger-pointing and speculation. Air traffic controllers revolted against what they characterized as unsafe conditions and set off national air transportation and political crises. We will have to wait for the official investigation's conclusions, but numerous errors and circumstances apparently combined to cause that tragedy. That errors were made is understandable. That many warning signs were ignored is troubling.

On July 17, we got another reminder of what can happen when warning signs are ignored. A TAM A320 skidded off the runway at Congonhas Airport, São Paulo, killing 199 people. Again, it will be a while before we know the causes, but this happened at a difficult airport under difficult conditions. Previous incidents and safety reports had warned of problems. Unfortunately, the safety situation wasn't really under control of the safety officials. Instead, judges and city politicians debated the types of airplane that could operate on the runway and the conditions required.

Another political frenzy followed the Congonhas tragedy. The most discouraging moment came on Aug. 1, when the transcript of the cockpit voice recording was made public as part of an investigation by the Brazilian House of Representatives; the international press sensationalized the last few moments of that crew's struggle. The recording should have been protected as part of the safety investigation under international law, but the information took pressure off politicians and officials responsible for the airport.

What not many people know is that, in that same week, there were victories in Brazil for the protection of safety information. The safety professionals in Brazil have been fighting back. On Aug. 7, the investigator-in-charge refused to provide the House of Representatives with information from the accident investigation. He cited in court a 1994 Supreme Court ruling barring the incarceration of people who refuse to release data protected by duty or professional obligation. It worked. The information was protected and he didn't go to jail.

It didn't end there. That same morning, criminal prosecutors seized computers and register books from some ATC facilities. The seizure was appealed to a higher court and was reversed. Since then, there has been talk of an initiative within Brazil's House of Representatives to revise their laws based on best practices elsewhere for the protection of safety data.

The safety professionals in Brazil are doing their job. They don't make as much noise as the politicians, but they are having an effect. They are risking their careers and their liberty to do the right thing. Our job in the safety community is to make sure such efforts don't go unnoticed, or unsupported. We must not forget that their fight is our fight. That is what it means to be a community.



A white, cursive handwritten signature of William R. Voss, written over a dark background.

*William R. Voss
President and CEO
Flight Safety Foundation*