

New Disclosure in Inquiry On Avianca Plane Crash

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The disclosure is of crucial importance to investigators who are examining the breakdown in communications between controllers and the crew of an Avianca flight that ran out of fuel and crashed on Long Island in January, killing 73 people.

The controllers have said that they did not give the plane immediate permission to land because the crew did not use the words "fuel emergency" to describe the plane's situation as it circled near Kennedy International Airport, waiting to land.

Transcripts have shown that the crew did ask for a "priority" and mentioned that the Colombian jetliner was running out of fuel 50 minutes before the crash. Testifying at a National Transportation Safety Board hearing here, the captain, Saul Pertuz, said the controllers' arguments amounted to "demanding prescribed phrases and leaving the common sense out of expressing an emergency." A Call for Clearer Communication

The testimony focused attention on the question of how effectively international flights are communicating with American controllers. Words like "fuel emergency" are standard within the United States but not necessarily among the world's airlines.

Shortly after the crash, the safety board recommended that pilots and controllers alike be reminded of the importance of clear language and standard phrases in discussing flight operations.

The Federal Aviation Administration issued such a bulletin, but it is hard to say how rigorously the standards are enforced. Captain Pertuz, a pilot with Avianca for 10 years, has flown to the United States many times, and he is the company's main participant in the safety board's investigation of the crash.

Air traffic controllers have testified that because Flight 52's crew members never used the specific terms "minimum fuel" or "fuel emergency," their requests for priority handling did not lead to an urgent response from the controllers.

"I was very surprised that 'priority' and 'running out of fuel' do not mean anything to them," Captain Pertuz said today, commenting on statements made by controllers at a hearing on Wednesday. "I'm terrified."

Discussing the company's instructions to its pilots, the Avianca captain said, "Nothing tells me here to use specific words, just to convey an idea."

A letter from the Colombian airline to the safety board, written on June 8 and released at the hearings, also affirmed that the company's training programs treated a request for "priority" handling as "a valid procedure for low-fuel conditions." 'A Word of Caution'

Captain Pertuz said the company had not fundamentally changed its instructions since the fatal flight, other than "raising a word of caution about our operations in the U.S."

The positions taken by the airline and the controllers represent attempts by each party to place the blame on the other. In the end, safety board officials say, both sides must be alert to the need for precise communications.

In other testimony today, an F.A.A. official defended the agency's traffic planning on the day of the crash, saying that extended delays were unavoidable that day and that the agency's handling of air traffic had not contributed to the accident.

Edward Ellenberger, an assistant manager for traffic management at the F.A.A.'s traffic control headquarters in Washington, said the long airborne delays experienced by jets in the New York area on the night of the accident were not caused by an overload of traffic in the system. Rather, he said, the delays occurred because the weather and visibility deteriorated, and many airplanes had to attempt to land more than once.

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