Flying In The Face of Adversity

Nick Ericsson assesses the state of Africa's airline industry following the recent crashes in Nigeria

A Boeing 737 belonging to ADC Airlines in Nigeria dropped from the skies and crashed last October 29, and with it what was left of the reputation and confidence in the country's airline industry. The loss of 96 lives – among them the spiritual head of Nigeria's 70 million Muslims, the sultan of Sokoto – followed soon after the plane took off from the capital, Abuja. But the tragedy, the third in a year, has meant industry watchers are throwing their hands up in collective exasperation at what they see as typifying the state of much of the continent's airlines. After all, it was only in September that another major crash killed ten of Nigeria's top army generals, nine months after an aircraft operated by Sosoliso Airlines crashed, killing more than 100 people, most of them children, and 11 months after a Bellview Airlines carrier killed 117 people soon after take off from Lagos airport. These crashes have been variously ascribed to malfunctioning engines, poor weather and pilot error. Beyond Nigeria, the Aviation Safety Network notes that Sudan, DR Congo, Morocco, Algeria, Kenya, São Tomé e Príncipe, Chad and Libya also feature in a list of countries which have had airline fatalities in the year to November 2006. Are these isolated incidents?

Well, no. Africa has suffered about a third of the world's air disasters, despite having less than four per cent of its air traffic. More specifically, Chantelle Benjamin of South Africa's *Business Day* newspaper writes that while there has been an overall decline in fatal airline crashes in most of the world, Africa has seen its average of fatal crashes rise from 5.1 in 1993 to 9.2 in 2005 – making the continent "ten times more dangerous than North America, Europe and Asia, and four times more dangerous than Latin America". Countries where the lives of passengers are most at risk include Sudan, Nigeria, DR Congo, Angola and Kenya. This, Benjamin says, is bad news for a continent which relies heavily on tourism to create jobs and generate economic output.

AFRICA'S TEN WORST CRASHES

Location	Airline	Fatalities
Morocco *1975*	Alia	188
Nigeria *1973*	Nigerian Airways	176
Niger *1989*	UTA	171
Ivory Coast *2000*	Kenya Airways	169
Libya *1992*	Libyan Arab Airlines	159
Nigeria *1992*	Nigerian Air Force	158
Egypt *2004*	Flash Airlines	148
Nigeria *1996*	ADC Airlines	143
Angola *1995*	Trans Service Airlift	141
Benin *2003*	UTA Guinea	141

Source: Aviation Safety Network

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More telling is that in March last year the European Aviation Safety Agency (Easa) banned 83 airlines from five African countries landing in Europe because of serious concerns over their safety records. This list includes airlines from Swaziland, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone and DR Congo. Some airline companies operating from Rwanda have also been told to stay out of Europe. Easa said at the time that even though most of these airlines did not actually fly to any European destinations, the ban was a preventative measure to avoid these airlines being subcontracted by larger carriers and so "sneaking in through the back door".

At the root of these fatalities is a lethal mix of inept airline management, poor training of pilots, corruption and, perhaps most crucially, the absence of any binding regulation in the industry.

During its recent general assembly in Egypt, the African Airlines Association (Afraa), representing 41 airlines, said that one of the many challenges facing an industry with a critical image problem is that African-grown staff, at least those who can boast some measure of competence and professionalism, are increasingly being lured away by more established and wealthy carriers, particularly from the Middle East. To remedy the problem, Afraa suggested that institutions such as the African Development Bank, as well as donor countries from the developed world, should provide funding to establish skills training for the continent's most under-resourced airlines to meet these skills shortages.

But even the most skilled and motivated pilot may find it difficult to fly what the European Union's transport commissioner, Jacques Barrot, has labelled "flying coffins". Often, African airlines will purchase old and rickety Soviet-era aircraft, including decommissioned military planes, without any safety records and for which spare parts are almost impossible to find. But it is not only the airborne equipment that needs to be updated. *The Economist* reported that following the 2005 Sosoliso crash in Nigeria, many of those killed were burnt to death – unnecessarily it seems since there were no fire hydrants available at the airport to fight the flames.

Furthermore, should money be given for skills training, recipient countries would have to provide some sort of guarantee that the funds would be channelled appropriately. As an extreme example of misplaced priorities, it has been reported that even though Nigeria set aside US$150 million in an emergency fund early last year to improve its airports, one government agency allegedly spent US$1 million on cutting the grass at the airport in Lagos.

In an overview, the Montreal-based International Air Transport Association (Iata), a regulatory body for more than 250 major airlines, released an agenda for African airlines in October 2005. Of course, passenger safety was the primary concern – flowing from which was the need to renew equipment and buildings in the continent's ➤

SUNDAY AGHAEZE/ AP PHOTO

The wreckage of a Nigerian airliner – which crashed just after take-off – lies in a field in Abuja. Among the dead was the spiritual leader of Muslims in Nigeria.

LORI WASELCHUK/GALBE.COM

Passengers boarding a flight at the OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg

airports, as well as updating its fleets of planes. Here there were non-committal and woolly statements made about the need for co-ordinated plans "to develop efficient and reasonably priced infrastructure". Iata was particularly reticent about throwing money at the problem. It said that, while it was available to help, "governments must approach continental solutions with vision, leadership and speed". In other words, Africans need to come up with solutions to their own airline woes – and fast.

But what was most concerning was Iata's advocacy of the privatisation and liberalisation of the African airline industry. "Regional liberalisation with achievable targets is a start," it said, with the ultimate goal in mind of "a commercially competitive air services industry in Africa". What alarms is not the advocacy of liberalisation per se. Rather, it is that a crucial aspect of Iata's brand of liberalisation seems to be missing from much of the African market: the opening up of the airline market to smaller carriers in order to bring prices down – all under the watchful eye of a clean, non-partisan regulatory body not afraid to challenge both the government and airline companies that may be in the good books of the government of the day. This is missing in Nigeria where the Civil Aviation Authority seems to have lost any ability to control an industry that has caught a fatal 'speed wobble'.

At the moment, privatisation and liberalisation do seem to be taking place in Nigeria, with the resultant plethora of smaller airlines and lower prices to challenge the monopoly of the national carrier. However, without effective independent oversight or regulation, corruption creeps in and the environment is compromised as airlines are encouraged to cut more corners to save money. The fact that the aviation minister in Nigeria was sacked soon after the ADC disaster does not remedy the problem of kickbacks and compromise in the name of profit, nor does the promise of an official enquiry into the state of the airline industry sufficiently placate passengers' fears.

Afraa concluded its Cairo gathering by calling for a grand African alliance in which members would give each other access to aviation markets and routes without the need for bilateral trade agreements. This would be liberalisation on a massive scale in response to what Afraa sees as fierce competition from European carriers such as British Airways (BA) which are increasing their presence in Africa.

"Kenya Airways, Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways are consistently named as Africa's best"

But this fails to take into account that the biggest threat facing African airlines is not from external forces, rather it is a matter of getting one's own house in order. With some exceptions, African airlines may have to accept that, for the moment at least, the size of their fleets and the experience of their pilots will mean that they will not be able to compete with the likes of Air France or BA for routes to Europe and North America. Instead, they should consolidate their own operations, even if that means scaling down for the sake of safety, and focus on domestic routes – as well as getting their passengers there safely.

This does not mean that Afraa should close the door on Iata (which has 29 African members) or other international bodies. The United Nations' civil aviation watchdog, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, has put pressure on Africa's airlines by announcing safety audits on countries whose safety records are poor. In order to retain membership of Iata, airlines will have to have an audit certificate. This has begun to bare fruit, although there is the danger that governments with poor safety records may want to deflect attention away from the problem by claiming sovereignty of their skies.

What of the success stories? Kenya Airways, Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways (SAA) are consistently named as three of Africa's best. At first glance, the market in South Africa seems to be in glowing health. There is SAA, the strong and established national carrier with experienced pilots, servicing one of the main routes into Africa from Europe, North America, the Far East and the Pacific, as well as enjoying competition through the presence of smaller airlines, which bring prices down. This is taking place under the watchful gaze of a number of regulatory bodies: the independent South African Civil Aviation Authority and even the state-owned Airports Company of South Africa and the Air Traffic and Navigation Services.

This does not mean it is perfect. The arrival in South Africa of yet another low-cost airline is causing concern – least of all for the added carbon emissions promised by one more player. Mango Air is the latest addition to a crowded market, but is allegedly being part subsidised by the national carrier, and by extension tax payers, in order to beat the competition and secure passengers.

Ethiopian Airlines too seems to tick many of the boxes: a high safety record (which includes being audited regularly by bodies in the United States as well as Ethiopia), a diversification into passenger and cargo flights, new planes, a programme to mentor new pilots and to update the skills of existing staff and expanding routes to 47 international destinations. Ditto Kenya Airways who can boast an increase in passenger numbers, as well as cargo and mail numbers – complimented by the expected upgrade of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. This has, to some extent, offset the increase in fuel costs triggered by high global oil prices.

Emulating these markets should be the goal of countries in Africa with shameful safety records. Not all has to happen at once, though. For now, some introspection is desperately needed. The rapidly escalating number of dead passengers in Nigeria needs to stop before the rebuilding of the continent's airline industry can begin.

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