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Miscues Doomed Brazilian Soccer Team's Final Flight

The plane carrying Brazilian championship contenders didn't plan refueling, investigators say

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The charter plane that ran out of fuel 8 miles short of its destination this week and crashed in Colombia, killing 71 people including most of a Brazilian soccer team, had bypassed a possible refueling stop that lacked lights as the flight was running behind and darkness fell.

That was one of a series of apparent miscues that emerged as investigators focused on the role of the Bolivian three-airplane company, LaMia, that had bid to carry the team to its first-ever international final, but had only one plane that was operational. That aircraft barely had the range to make the nearly 2,000-mile flight, and had insufficient fuel reserves in case anything went wrong.

Pilot Miguel Quiroga, who perished in the crash, was a co-owner of the airline, alongside Gustavo Vargas, a retired Bolivian Air Force general. Mr. Vargas's son, Gustavo Steven Vargas Villegas, it emerged this week, was the head of aircraft registration at the country's aviation authority.

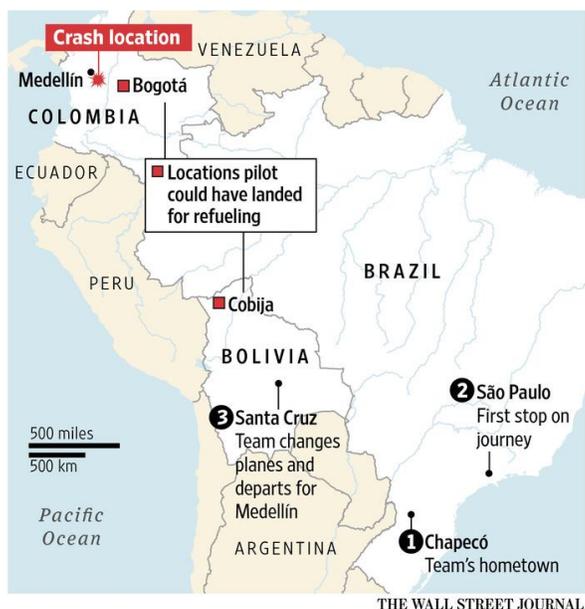
Mr. Vargas Villegas resigned Thursday, a person familiar with the matter said. Bolivia's civil-aviation authority has suspended the airline's operating license, and Bolivian President Evo Morales has called for an investigation into the matter.

International rules require a flight to carry 30 minutes of reserve fuel, plus additional gallons. "In this case, lamentably, the airplane did not have the required amount of contingency fuel," said Freddy Bonilla, Colombia's secretary for air safety and lead accident investigator. "We are trying to establish the reason why the crew, and the offices of the airline, allowed this."

The plane's flight-data recorders—its black boxes—were on their way to the U.K. Friday for analysis, Mr. Bonilla said. Accident investigators said they opted to have the data analyzed in the U.K. because the doomed aircraft was British-made.

The crash, one of the worst disasters in sports history, killed 19 athletes, plus staff of the Chapecoense soccer team, journalists who were flying with the team and most of the flight crew. Of the six survivors, three are players for the team; one had his leg amputated from his injuries.

Chapecoense, a former fourth-division soccer team from a small city in southern Brazil, had embarked on a historic run in recent years, climbing into Brazil's top-flight league. In recent weeks, it captured the hearts of South American soccer fans with a Cinderella run through the Copa Sudamericana club tournament, defeating far richer and bigger teams.



Less than a week before its ill-fated flight, the team won the tournament semifinals against Argentina's San Lorenzo, who count Pope Francis among their supporters, thanks to a miraculous last-minute save by the goalkeeper Marcos Danilo Padilha. Mr. Padilha was found alive at the crash site but died on his way to the hospital.

Many fans now say they wish he had never made the save at all.

After that win, giddy club officials at Chapecoense decided to travel on a plane chartered for the team instead of a commercial flight to the first game of the two-leg final against Colombia's Atlético Nacional. When a LaMia airlines representative offered its service, the team accepted.

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They had taken Lionel Messi. This gave us tranquility.

—Chapecoense Vice President Gelson Dalla Costa

The Bolivian airline had increasingly targeted soccer teams, offering fares below other charter firms, according to Argentine media reports. Just three weeks before the ill-fated flight, the same LaMia plane ferried the Argentine national team back to Buenos Aires from Belo Horizonte after its World Cup qualifying match against Brazil.

“They had taken Lionel Messi,” Chapecoense Vice President Gelson Dalla Costa, who didn't go on the journey, told reporters this week. “Imagine the criteria that the Argentine team would have, to transport one of the most important players of all time? This gave us tranquility.”

The journey, however, was fraught with delays, bureaucratic missteps and risky decisions from the get-go.

Initially, the LaMia airline asked for permission to fly directly from Brazil to Colombia, but the request was denied: A charter flight between two countries can't be operated by an airline from a third country, according to Brazilian aviation officials.

So the team left São Paulo's Guarulhos International Airport Monday evening on another Bolivian carrier, arriving in the hot, Bolivian city of Santa Cruz to board the LaMia flight.

Once the team finally reached Santa Cruz, it was several hours behind schedule. They still had to get more than halfway across the continent by that night to have the following day in Medellín to prepare for the biggest match of their careers on Wednesday.

It was at that point that pilots drew up a flight plan that didn't include a stop for refueling, air-crash investigators said. A logical stopping point would have been in Cobia, in northern Bolivia, a Colombian investigator said. However, the small

airport doesn't have runway lights after dark, officials have said, and at that point, night was approaching fast.

Another refueling option was Bogotá, Colombia. But the pilot didn't stop there either, instead choosing to push on another 40 minutes northwest to Medellín.

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This is an accident that should never have happened.
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—**Steven Marks, a Miami-based attorney who represents crash victims**

When it approached the airport there, controllers put the plane into a routine holding pattern behind two other commercial aircraft. The pilot signaled that he was out of fuel, but too late, crashing near the hamlet of La Unión 8 miles short of the airport.

An official at Corporación America, an Argentine company that operates 53 airports around the world, said Mr. Quiroga, the pilot and co-owner of the airline, had a strong incentive not to declare a fuel emergency because it would have led to sanctions that could have grounded the company and potentially put it out of business.

Steven Marks, a Miami-based attorney and pilot who represents airplane crash victims, said regulation for charter flights is weak in the U.S. and effectively nonexistent in much of Latin America.

“In certain geographical areas of the world the regulatory environment is not as reliable and people can get away with things much easier than in other parts of the world,” Mr. Marks said. “This is an accident that should never have happened.”

The accident left Chapecó and the world of Latin America soccer reeling from the sudden loss.

As a couple thousand fans of the Chapecoense soccer club in the southern Brazilian city of Chapecó gathered Friday afternoon at their beloved team's stadium to share their grief, many couldn't hold back their outrage at the questionable decisions that had robbed their city of its heroes.

“It creates indignation because it was a human failure. It wasn't a problem with nature, with the weather,” said Claudiane Penegalli, 27, who has come to mourn at the Arena Condá every day since the disaster. “This could have been prevented.”

Chapecó, meanwhile, is preparing for a ceremony like no other in its 100-year history, as the bodies of victims were set to return early Saturday morning.

“[The pilot] trivialized other people's lives,” said 38-year-old Juliana Cózzer, who runs a hardware store in the city. “If you need to fill the tank, you need to fill the tank—lateness doesn't matter. Now they're never going to arrive.”

—*Taos Turner in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, contributed to this article.*