

FINANCIAL POST

Airblue crash

Meekal Ahmed
Chantilly, VA USA.
31-07-10

Even though I sit 7,200 miles away from the scene of the crash of the Airblue Airbus A321 at Islamabad, the shock on opening the morning Pakistani papers on the Internet and reading the news was palpable.

I have lived in Islamabad for 25 years and loved commercial aviation since I was two years old (as my late mother told me), flown myself as a pilot, read countless books on the subject with a focus on flight safety. Despite the many air accidents we read about, and the spate of recent ones, flying is still the safest form of travel. It is calculated that if you were born on an airplane and flew in it and never got off, the statistical probability is that you should not expect to be involved in a fatal accident until you were 78 years old. Those are pretty good odds.

Yet for all those reassuring statistical probabilities when an air accident does happen it fills us with fear and trepidation. What happened to a new highly sophisticated fly-by-wire Airbus A320 with the most advanced avionics and systems that man has created to date to cause it to fly into a hill? Not only was the aircraft state-of-the-art, the commander Capt. Pervez Choudhry was an ex-PIA pilot on the Boeing 747 Jumbo with thousands of hours of flying time. He must have made hundreds of landing and take-offs from Islamabad airport in his flying career. How can a highly experienced pilot, no doubt trained on the most modern six-axis motion simulators (which can be more challenging to fly than the real aircraft), piloting a high-tech aircraft hit a wall and kill everyone?

Two aircraft ahead of the A321 broke-off their approaches and diverted to Lahore. However, the weather can change quickly and for the better. It is my sense, based on chatter on Internet aviation forums, that the captain was making a circle-to-land approach. This is a tricky manoeuvre, which I have flown many times and is used when the wind in Islamabad is out of the east. The procedure calls for a normal Instrument Landing System (ILS) approach to Runway 30. At a specified height and presuming that you can see the runway environment you break off the approach, curve to the right and then left and fly parallel to the Margalla Hills, turn left again and approach the opposite Runway 12 coming in over Murree Road. You can either keep visual separation from the Margalla Hills to your right or if the hills

are shrouded in low clouds, as they were that fateful day, you stay within an arc (which is drawn from a point at the airport). This arc is clearly displayed on your Navigation Display (ND) as a curved line. I do not recall the distance of the arc from the airport, but obviously the arc is calculated to keep you clear of the surrounding high ground.

Something fateful happened. A lapse of concentration, distraction, or the greatest killer of all: over-confidence and complacency. What is tragically obvious is that the captain drifted outside the curved arc and hit the hills. It is almost certain that as the aircraft approached the high terrain a computer-generated voice in the Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning System (EGPWS) would have warned "Terrain! Terrain!" When you hear that chilling warning the procedure is to immediately pitch up the nose of the aircraft to about 15 degrees while simultaneously applying GA (Go-Around) full power, wings level and straight ahead. If you hesitate, turn, or think the warning is false, or are not aggressive enough with the manoeuvre you will most likely hit something. If I am completely wrong and he was making an approach to Runway 30 and hit the Margalla Hills he was way off-course. Why and how? What about Air Traffic Control and radar? Did they not see the aircraft on their scope getting dangerously close to high ground?

We will never know. Pakistan has no tradition of publishing air accident reports. Cairo, Taif, Kathmandu and most recently, Multan remain cloaked in deep mystery. All the public hears or gets is rumors, ill-informed speculation on the media, spin, denial, and obfuscation from the authorities.

This tragic accident will change nothing. So, as the saying goes, if we do not learn from our past mistakes we are doomed to repeat them. Sounds to me much like our economic policy-making.