

Early Reports of Pilot Error in Air France Crash Are Condemned

The main pilots' union at Air France and relatives of the 228 people who died in the Atlantic crash of Air France Flight 447 two years ago strongly condemned reports Tuesday suggesting that crucial errors by the jet's crew might have led to the disaster.

(NYT) In recent days, a series of reports have surfaced in the European and American news media purporting to describe details that accident investigators have gleaned from the data contained in the plane's so-called black boxes, which was successfully downloaded last week.

Some of those reports, citing anonymous sources, have suggested that the data indicates that the crew reacted to a cascade of system failures on the Airbus A330-200 jet exactly as they had been trained to do, while others have said there was evidence that the pilots failed to follow standard procedures.

"Every day there's a new leak," said Jean-Louis Barber, president of the Air France branch of France's main pilots' union, Syndicat National des Pilotes de Ligne, which represents 80 percent of Air France's pilots. "It is inconsistent, it is scandalously damaging and it is preventing investigators from doing their work."

For the past week, technical investigators at the nation's Bureau of Investigations and Analyses, or B.E.A., have been poring over more than 1,300 pieces of flight data and two hours of cockpit voice recordings. The bureau is expected to publish a brief chronology of the events captured on the recorders on Friday, but a fuller analysis of the probable causes of the accident is not expected before the end of July.

A criminal inquiry led by a Paris magistrate is also under way, though experts said it would take several months to reach any conclusions. Air France and Airbus have been placed under formal investigation for involuntary manslaughter - a step short of being charged.

Late Monday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the Air France pilots apparently became distracted by inconsistent airspeed readings as the plane entered extreme turbulence and failed to properly address other flight systems as they sought to troubleshoot the problem. The report, which cited unnamed people familiar with investigators' preliminary findings, suggested that problems with the airspeed sensors led the plane's autopilot to disengage and that the pilots then allowed the plane to slow down dangerously and stall. Meanwhile, a report over the weekend by the German magazine Der Spiegel cited an anonymous expert as saying Flight 447 did not encounter any increased turbulence. The report said that the plane shuddered after the airspeed sensors failed and that the plane's two co-pilots, and not its captain, were at the controls.

A B.E.A. spokeswoman declined to comment on Tuesday. Representatives for Airbus and Air France said they would not respond before the publication of the chronology on Friday.

Robert Soulas, whose daughter and son-in-law died in the crash, said he found the recent volley of news media reports "deplorable."

"This is extremely upsetting for the families," said Mr. Soulas, a spokesman for Entraide et Solidarité AF447, a group representing relatives of 60 of the victims. "I am thinking in particular of the families of the pilots who are being anonymously accused and cannot defend themselves."