

US, Canada ground Boeing 737 Max 8s after Ethiopia crash (Update)

March 13 2019, by Zeke Miller And Rob Gillies



In this photo taken Monday, March 11, 2019, a Boeing 737 MAX 8 airplane being built for TUI Group sits parked at Boeing Co.'s Renton Assembly Plant in Renton, Wash. Britain, France and Germany on Tuesday joined a rapidly growing number of countries grounding the new Boeing plane involved in the Ethiopian Airlines disaster or turning it back from their airspace, while investigators in Ethiopia looked for parallels with a similar crash just five months ago. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

President Donald Trump issued an emergency order Wednesday grounding all Boeing 737 Max 8 aircraft in the wake of a crash of an

Ethiopian airliner that killed 157 people, a reversal for the U.S. after federal aviation regulators had maintained it had no data to show the jets are unsafe.

The decision came hours after Canada joined some 40 other countries in barring the Max 8 from its airspace, saying satellite tracking data showed possible but unproven similarities between the Ethiopian Airlines [crash](#) and a previous crash involving the model five months ago. The U.S. also grounded a larger version of the plane, the Max 9.

The Federal Aviation Administration said "new information from the wreckage" of the Ethiopia crash, along with satellite-based tracking of the flight path, indicated some similarities with a Lion Air crash in the Java Sea that killed 187 people in October.

The information "warrants further investigation of the possibility of a shared cause for the two incidents that needs to be better understood and addressed," the FAA said in a statement.

Trump, who had received assurances Monday from Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg that the Max aircraft was sound, said the safety of the American people is of "paramount concern."

Trump said any plane currently in the air will go to its destination and then be grounded, adding that pilots and airlines have been notified.

Boeing issued a statement saying it supported the FAA's decision even though it "continues to have full confidence in the safety of the 737 MAX." The company also said it had itself recommended the suspension of the Max fleet after consultations with the FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board.

"We are supporting this proactive step out of an abundance of caution,"

Boeing said.

Canadian Transport Minister Marc Garneau said a comparison of vertical fluctuations found a "similar profile" between the Ethiopian Airlines crash and the Lion Air crash. Garneau, a former astronaut who flew in the space shuttle, emphasized that the data is not conclusive but crossed a threshold that prompted Canada to bar the Max 8.

He said the new information indicated that the Ethiopian Airline jet's automatic system kicked in to force the nose of the aircraft down after computer software determined it was too high. He said that in the case of the Lion Air crash off Indonesia, the pilot fought against computer software that wanted to drop the nose of the plane.

"So, if we look at the profile, there are vertical fluctuations, in the vertical profile of the aircraft and there were similarities in what we saw," Garneau said. "But I would repeat once again. This is not the proof that is the same root problem. It could be something else."

Canada lost 18 of its citizens in Sunday's crash, the second highest number after Kenya. A Canadian family of six were among the dead.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian Airlines said Wednesday that [flight recorders](#) from the jet that crashed will be sent to Europe for analysis, but it was unclear where. Some aviation experts have warned that finding answers in the crash could take months.

The European Union has also barred the Max 8. China ordered its airlines to ground the planes—they had 96 Max 8 jets in service, more than one-fourth of the approximately 370 Max jets in circulation.

The growing number of countries joining the ban put the FAA in a difficult position, said Peter Goetz, a former managing director of the

NTSB who is now an aviation consultant. He said the FAA, which certified the 737 Max as airworthy and has been the lead regulatory body for the airplane, prides itself on making data-driven decisions and not based on "anecdotes or political pressures."

Goelz said Trump likely was feeling pressure from Congress and the public to step in.

"There's probably nobody in the administration who's got more of a sensitive ear to cable television," said Goelz.

The FAA is also certain to be looking into anonymous reports from at pilots of at least two U.S. flights who wrote about problems last year in a NASA database, Goelz said.

The pilots reported that an automated system seemed to cause their Boeing 737 Max 8 planes to tilt down suddenly. The pilots said that soon after engaging the autopilot, the nose tilted down sharply. In both cases, they recovered quickly after disconnecting the autopilot.

Southwest and American airlines, the main users of the 737 Max in the U.S., have logged tens of thousands of safe flight hours with the planes, Goelz said. United Airlines flies a slightly larger version of the plane, the Max 9. All three carriers vouched for the safety of Max aircraft on Wednesday.

After Trump's announcement, American Airlines said it's "teams will make every effort to rebook customers as quickly as possible."

United Airlines, which grounded its 14 Max planes, said the aircraft account for roughly 40 flights per day. Through a combination of spare aircraft and rebooking customers, the airline did not anticipate a significant operational impact.

Southwest Airlines said it immediately complied with the order and removed its 34 Max 8 from scheduled service. The airline said the Max 8 planes account for less than 5 percent of the airline's daily flights. Southwest said it remains confident in the airliner after completing more than 88,000 flight hours over 41,000 flights, but it supports the FAA's decision.

Lebanon and Kosovo also barred the Boeing 737 Max 8 from their airspace Wednesday, and Norwegian Air Shuttles said it would seek compensation from Boeing after grounding its fleet. Egypt banned the operation of the aircraft. Thailand ordered budget airline Thai Lion Air to suspend flying the planes for risk assessments. Lion Air confirmed reports it has put on hold the scheduled delivery of four of the jets.

Ethiopian Airlines, widely seen as Africa's best-managed airline, grounded its remaining four models.

Ethiopia was searching for a European to take the black box from Sunday's plane crash for analysis.

Germout Freitag, a spokesman for Germany's Federal Bureau of Aircraft Accident Investigation, said that agency declined a request from Ethiopia to analyze the box because it lacked the software needed.

A spokesman for Ethiopian Airlines, Asrat Begashaw, said the airline has "a range of options" for the data and voice recorders of the flight's last moments.

"What we can say is we don't have the capability to probe it here in Ethiopia," he said. An airline official has said one of the recorders was partially damaged.

Boeing's technical team joined U.S., Israeli, Kenyan and other aviation

experts in the investigation led by Ethiopian authorities.

An Ethiopian pilot who saw the crash site minutes after the disaster told AP that the plane appeared to have "slid directly into the ground."

Ethiopian Airlines CEO Tewolde Gebremariam said their pilots had received special training.

"In addition to the basic trainings given for 737 aircraft types, an additional training was given for the Max version," Tewolde told state news reporters. "After the Lion Air crash, questions were raised, so Boeing sent further instructions that it said pilots should know."

Tewolde said he is confident the "investigation will reveal that the crash is not related to Ethiopian Airlines' safety record."

Forensic DNA work for identifications of the remains recovered so far has not yet begun, Asrat said. The dead came from 35 countries.

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