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Honduras Wants Palmerola Base Back From U.S. For International Airport After Tegucigalpa Crash

by LADB Staff

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Its runways are too short, it is surrounded by hills, its approaches are treacherous, its navigation equipment archaic, and on May 30 Honduras' Toncontin International Airport delivered the disaster it has been promising for years. A Grupo TACA Airbus A320 overshot its landing, crashing into a busy Tegucigalpa street. The pilot, two passengers, and a passing motorist were killed and more may die. Of the 140 on board, 65 people were injured. Beneath the drama and pathos of the moment lies Honduras' long-simmering battle to regain control of its sovereign territory from the US and move the airport.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known, but weather was thought to be a factor. Experts said some days after that the 10-knot tail wind would not have been a problem, but visibility may have played some part. The runway was wet from Tropical Storm Alma's drenching. Airport manager Carlos Ramos said, "The plane inexplicably circled the city twice, and it ran out of runway because it landed more than halfway down." He said the plane "didn't touch down where they normally do, at the start of the runway, and that is being investigated." There has been no official corroboration of Ramos' account, but newspapers reported viewing security videos that showed the plane touching down "in front of the main terminal building, that is, far down the runway, when it had already gone at least 40% of the length of it."

Foreign investigators arriving on the scene said the situation could have been worse, but the pilot, seeing he had no chance to take off again, shut down engines. Had he not, a fire or explosion would probably have occurred. Firefighters arrived quickly on the scene and dealt effectively with a massive fuel spill. Published accounts said the conversation between pilot and tower discussed the weather, and the tower left the landing decision to the pilot, a normal procedure.

One unusual aspect of the landing was the compass heading. The plane landed north to south, in the direction of the wind. A plane generally lands against the wind. The tower gave correct wind information to the pilot, who did not object to the runway assignment, arousing comment among experienced pilots the local media contacted. Prensa Grafica in El Salvador noted, "This, according to some experienced pilots who have landed at that airport and who were consulted by La Prensa Grafica, would work against braking at the moment of landing on a short field." According to TACA, the plane was on the next-to-last leg of a Los Angeles

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