

★ TOP NEWS

157 DIE IN 737 CRASH

Boeing likely to face new questions after 2nd disaster involving Max 8 in 5 months

BY DAVID KOENIG
AP Airlines Writer

Sunday's devastating plane crash in Ethiopia could renew safety questions about the newest version of Boeing's popular 737 airliner.

The Boeing 737 Max 8 operated by Ethiopian Airlines crashed shortly after taking off from the capital of Addis Ababa, killing all 157 people on board.

The plane, en route to Nairobi, the capital of neighboring Kenya, carved a gash in the earth. Black body bags were spread out while Red Cross and other workers looked for remains. As the sun set, the airline's chief operating officer said the plane's flight data recorder had not yet been found.

Around the world, families were gripped by grief. The airline said eight Americans and 18 Canadians were killed; passengers and crew came from 35 countries.

Both Addis Ababa and Nairobi are major hubs for humanitarian workers, and many people were on their way to a large U.N. environmental conference set to begin Monday in Nairobi.

The plane was new. The weather was clear. Yet something was wrong, and the pilots tried to return to the airport. They never made it.

In those circumstances, the accident is eerily similar to an October crash in which a 737 Max 8 flown by Indonesia's Lion Air plunged into the Java Sea minutes after takeoff, killing all 189 people on the plane. But safety experts cautioned



Wreckage from the Ethiopian Airlines flight that crashed shortly after takeoff 31 miles south of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. AP

against quickly drawing too many parallels between the two crashes.

William Waldock, an aviation-safety professor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, said suspicion will be raised because the same type of plane appeared to crash the same way — a fatal nosedive that left wreckage in tiny pieces.

"Investigators are not big believers in coincidence," he said.

Alan Diehl, a former National Transportation Safety Board investigator, said the similarities included both crews encountering a problem shortly after takeoff, and reports of large variations in vertical speed during ascent, "clearly suggesting a potential controllability problem" with the Ethiopian jetliner.



This photo taken Feb. 11 shows an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 737-800 parked at Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. BEN CURTIS/AP

But there are many possible explanations, Diehl said, including engine problems, pilot error, weight load, sabotage or bird strikes.

The Ethiopian Airlines CEO

told reporters that a maintenance check-up did not find any problems with the plane before Sunday's flight, "so it is hard to see any parallels with the Lion Air crash yet," said Harro Ranter, founder of the Aviation Safety Network, which compiles information about accidents worldwide.

"I do hope though that people will wait for the first results of the investigation instead of jumping to conclusions based on the very little facts that we know so far," he said.

Boeing representatives did not immediately respond for comment. The company tweeted that it was "deeply saddened to learn of the passing of the passengers and crew" on the Ethiopian Airlines Max airplane.

The Chicago-based company said it would send a technical team to the crash site to help Ethiopian and U.S. investigators.

A spokesman for the NTSB said the U.S. agency was sending a team of four to assist Ethiopian authorities. Boeing and the U.S. investigative agency are also involved in the Lion Air probe.

Indonesian investigators have not stated a cause for the Lion Air crash, but they are examining whether faulty readings from a sensor might have triggered an automatic nose-down command to the plane, which the Lion Air pilots fought unsuccessfully to overcome.

Days after the Oct. 29 accident, Boeing sent a notice to airlines that faulty information from a sensor could cause the plane to automatically point the nose down. The notice reminded pilots of the procedure for handling such a situation, which is to disable the system causing the automatic nose-down movements.

Chicago-based attorney Robert Clifford, who has represented victims of several airline crashes, said the Federal Aviation Administration needs to do more to address the problem. His experts think it might have also contributed to the Ethiopian crash. And, he said, "these planes are in the air all over the world right now."

"This is not the time to dally," Clifford told the Chicago Sun-Times. "This is important stuff."

Boeing Chairman and CEO Dennis Muilenburg said in December that the Max is a safe plane, and that Boeing did not withhold operating details from airlines and pilots.

The 737 is the best-selling airliner in history, and the Max is the newest version of it, with more fuel-efficient engines.