

# Orient aviation

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## TIME TO RE-FOCUS

Beleaguered Air India's new chairman, Raghu Menon, aims to repair carrier's battered image

**ALSO:**

*Indian carriers lurching from crisis to crisis*

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**SPECIAL REPORT: Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul in the Asia-Pacific**

AAPA 3<sup>rd</sup> Emergency Response Conference

# The people factor

By Jonathan Sharp

**A**gainst an apocalyptic backdrop of potential global economic tailspin, with dire ramifications for commercial aviation, the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA) convened its 3rd Emergency Response Conference in October, reviewing a topic that has to be of constant concern to airlines in fair financial weather or foul.

The conference, held in Hong Kong for the first time and hosted by Cathay Pacific Airways, took as its theme *People, Plans, Partnerships*, focusing on the importance of the “people” factor – victims, families, crew and staff – in responding to aircraft accidents and similar crises.

One of the several recurrent themes at the conference, attended by more than 170 delegates, was that AAPA airlines have maintained safety levels fully comparable to the very high standards set by its counterparts in Europe and North America. But as AAPA director general, Andrew Herdman, said, despite these best efforts accidents do happen.

“Every case is a tragedy and places immense pressures on all those concerned. Dealing with any crisis goes far beyond planning and logistics. We are dealing with precious human lives and heartfelt emotions. Therefore we also need to be sensitive to the diverse social and cultural issues involved,” he said.

The Asia-Pacific region has already learnt some painful lessons in response to natural disasters, such as the tsunami. But what is its record in addressing aviation safety issues and responding to related crises?

One clear verdict came from Alan Stray, director international of the Australian Transport Safety Bureau. He detailed a number of shortcomings that contributed to fatal accidents in the Asia-Pacific. But he stressed that such problems were by no means confined to this region. They cropped up in many countries “and are continuing to happen”.

“Research into major accidents reveals



**Hong Kong International Airport, Cathay Pacific and the Hong Kong emergency services conduct an emergency response exercise at the airport**

that there were always warning signs prior to the occurrence, whose significance was missed or dismissed,” Stray said, appealing to airlines to work closely with investigative authorities.

“A culture of risk denial is often the culprit. In many circumstances organisations and individuals are not simply unaware of risks; there are mechanisms that deny the existence of risk.”

Looking at major accidents over the years in the Asia-Pacific, Stray cited a number of case studies where signs of trouble were overlooked, disregarded, or ignored by a number of players, including regulators and airlines.

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**Alan Stray**  
Director, International  
Australian Transport Safety Bureau

In the case of an Indonesian Adam Air 737-400, which crashed into the sea on a domestic flight on January 1, 2007, with the loss of 102 lives, operational issues included the pilots focusing on trouble-shooting a repetitive IRS malfunction. As a result neither pilot was flying the plane and control was lost. Lack of appropriate training of the pilots, plus maintenance issues, were cited as contributing to the disaster.

Hong Kong International Airport got high marks as a model of efficiency in addressing emergencies from Robert Kent, contingency planning manager of Cathay Pacific Airways.

“But not every airport in Asia, or in the world for that matter, really takes it to that level and takes it seriously,” he said.

There were some “shockers”, according to Kent, including an unnamed airport whose staff, when asked about procedures for separating passengers and crew following an accident, said there were none since the crew’s help was needed in the relief effort. “We told them that was totally unacceptable as the crew had just endured a traumatic event,” he said.

Kent also spoke approvingly of an AAPA initiative to develop a Mutual Assistance

Programme whereby two airlines sign a contract that ensures if an accident of one airline occurs in the home port of the partner, the latter will treat the crisis as its own. This initiative “puts us ahead of the rest of the world”, said Kent.

The AAPA favours strengthening regulatory oversight of airlines where gaps and weaknesses occur. In Asia, there were some shortcomings, said Herdman, mentioning Indonesia and the Philippines as cases in point, without elaborating.

Speaking on the industry’s regulatory regime, Peter Coles, of law firm Barlow Lyde and Gilbert, noted that first and foremost, airlines had a legal obligation to report accidents immediately to insurance brokers – and this requirement was not always observed.

He cited a case in Laos a dozen years ago where an airliner – he did not name the carrier – crashed in a mountainous area known for cannibalism. There were two survivors: a stewardess, who was raped and killed and a baby, who was eaten.

“Insurers and lawyers were not notified for over two weeks. Why? Because the airline and provincial government were embarrassed by what had happened,” said Coles. Prompt reporting might have enabled the military to establish order at the crash site.

Coles emphasised that when the aviation industry is trying to encourage a safety culture, it has to be careful about using blame, punishment and criminalization of people linked to accidents. It should consider what effect such action might have on the willingness of crew and others to speak up about safety incidents.

Addressing the multiple requirements of responding to emergencies, Peng Lim of law firm Clyde & Co outlined a fictional – but plausible – case study of an air crash in Bali and the daunting number of issues involved in dealing with it. These include, she said, the exhaustion that soon overtakes relief teams and the difficulty of getting credit in times of crisis – an extremely topical point.

Inevitably, the global economic crisis weighed heavily on the minds of conferees. Asked whether the meltdown might conceivably compromise airline safety, Herdman responded: “It’s a valid concern, but I’m absolutely confident that the industry will always treat safety as the number one priority regardless of commercial pressures.”

The complex issue of paying appropriate respect to the dead of different religious beliefs was reviewed by Father Emilio Lim, a Catholic from the Philippines, Captain Roger



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**Andrew Herdman**  
Director General  
AAPA

Chiu, a Buddhist from Taiwan, and Captain Hafiz Firdaus, a Moslem from Malaysia.

Capt. Chiu said families of deceased victims were not encouraged to cry in front of their loved ones, as this might upset the “spirit” of the dead. But Anthony Yeo, consultant therapist of the Counselling and Care Centre in Singapore, said the bereaved should not be constrained from showing emotion.

“Let people cry. Let people say what they want. Listen to what is said, even though we may not have answers to questions asked. Avoid restraining any other reactions, so long as they are not hurting themselves or others near them,” he said.

But, he advised, there were words to avoid saying to those grieving: “everything will be OK,” “at least he is still alive,” or “now that he is gone at least he is not suffering any more”, were three examples.

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**Damian Coory**  
Director for Training, Asia-Pacific  
Edelman PR

Speaking about cultural considerations in disaster management response, Mark Edwards, regional vice-president, operations Australia, Kenyon International Emergency Services, stressed the importance of not generalizing about victims’ religion. Christianity has about 50 denominations, some moderate, some less so, and 1.1 billion people have no religion.

Edwards graphically illustrated the pitfalls of visually identifying victims. He spoke of a British police officer whose daughter was killed in Thailand in the tsunami. He flew to Thailand, identified the body and repatriated it back to UK, only to find out the body was that of a German citizen.

The vexed issue of how to deal with the media during an aviation crisis was dealt with by Damian Coory, Edelman’s director for training Asia-Pacific.

As a case study, he cited the January accident when a British Airways (BA) B777 came up short of the runway at London Heathrow Airport. He noted the time it took – 36 minutes – for the BBC to start showing images of the crash, with a commentator who clearly knew little about aviation and the speed of the first media response by BA CEO Willie Walsh. BA did a good job, Coory concluded, but added: “Most companies get [their] media response in crisis dead wrong.”

His recommendations to companies included: set up a parallel crisis management team, with a communications team sitting alongside the emergency response team; knock any disinformation promptly on the head; have the company boss front and centre for the media as rapidly as possible (think how Rudy Giuliani’s standing was boosted post 9/11); never say “no comment” to the media, as that leaves a void that others will fill; never be hostile and defensive.

In closing remarks, Herdman said it was always necessary to remind ourselves of the airline industry’s extraordinary safety record. Looking at western-built large jets, about 20 major accidents occur each year, with about 10 or less involving fatalities. “In terms of fatal accidents in that category we are talking about one in about 2.5 million flights,” he said.

“Given that our safety record is as good as it is, there aren’t enough accidents to use the accidents alone as the forensics to deduce how to make the system even safer. So much of the safety effort is focused on looking at safe flights, looking at flights that didn’t end in disaster, but might have done so.” ■