

Wind shear alert was down
Officials say system not crucial for landing

POST REPORTERS

Rites for the victims

Phuket airport officials attend a merit-making ceremony near the runway yesterday. Behind them is the covered wreckage of the ill-fated One-Two-Go airliner, which has been moved from the actual accident site further up the runway. Systems to detect dangerous winds at Phuket international airport have emerged as a new factor possibly linked to the horrendous crash of the One-Two-Go flight on Sunday.

Wuttichai Singmanee, director of air safety at the Civil Aviation Department, said three of the six wind shear alert systems at the airport had problems.

"Three out of six low-level wind shear alert systems were not working at the time," Mr Wuttichai said in a report by the AP.

An official at Phuket airport who declined to be named told the Bangkok Post that the system run by the Meteorological Department had not functioned for months.

The systems detect sudden strong winds, also known as wind shear, which could cause trouble for a plane landing at the airport.

Officials responsible for the system would normally alert air traffic controllers to warn pilots about the situation on the ground.

These systems are installed at all international airports in Thailand. They are located in areas around the airport.

With investigators still trying to determine the cause of the tragedy, it was unclear yesterday whether the accident, which left 89 people dead and 41 injured, was due to pilot error or weather conditions.

But Mr Wuttichai said even though the wind shear detection system was not fully functional, this would not necessarily lead to an accident.

The airport at Phuket was also equipped with its own, separate wind detecting system and could inform incoming and outgoing planes of the situation, the official said.

"The wind shear alert system is not a requirement for an international aviation standard," he said.

A pilot of Thai Airways International (THAI), who asked not to be named, agreed with Mr Wuttichai, saying the wind shear detection system was not crucial for landing or take-off.

Most passenger aircraft nowadays were equipped with their own wind detection equipment, which the pilot could refer to, he said.

Transport permanent secretary Chaisawat Kittipornpaiboon, who is heading the inquiry into the disaster, said wind shear had not been ruled out and it had been the cause of several major airline accidents.

Transport and aviation authorities yesterday appealed to the public not to point the finger at Arief Mulyadi, the chief pilot on the fatal flight.

Chaisak Ungsuwan, director-general of the Civil Aviation Department, said no judgement should be passed before the information on the cockpit voice recorder and the flight data recorder had been analysed.

The recorders, which were retrieved from the wreckage of the plane, were being sent to the United States for analysis, he said. The McDonnell Douglas MD-82 was made in the US.

"I do not want to see any blame heaped on the pilot or any other party involved because it is not fair. We should wait for the results of the examination of the data recorders," said Mr Chaisak.

Khajit Hapnanont, chief executive officer of One-Two-Go Airlines, echoed the appeal. He insisted the airline's safety was not lax and that Mr Mulyadi was one of the company's best.

Mr Chaisak, quoting a recorded conversation between the pilot and the flight tower, said flight OG 269 requested landing permission and inquired about weather and wind speed about four minutes after an aircraft owned by Orient Thai Airlines, which owns One-Two-Go, landed safely.

He said flight OG 269 also acknowledged that wind shear had been reported by the other plane before asking for landing approval.

Khanit Promsathit, a THAI pilot, said Phuket airport is a difficult place to land especially at night or in bad weather.

Two critically injured passengers were yesterday flown to a hospital in Bangkok for intensive burn treatment.

Phuket public health office chief Wanchai Sattayawuthiwong said Chainarong Maharae, 38, chief of Bang Muang tambon administration organisation in Phangnga and Ms Bethan Jones, 22, a Briton, sustained 40-60% burns and were transferred to a Bangkok hospital.

Pol Col Pomprasert Kanjanarin, deputy chief of the Foreign Affairs Division, said 36 bodies of Thai victims had been claimed by relatives.

Forensic officials had identified 20 out of the 53 foreigners killed.

21 SEPTEMBER 2007

POST REPORTERS

88 die in Phuket plane crash

A budget airline flight with 130 people aboard crashed on landing at Phuket airport in heavy rains and strong winds yesterday, killing 88 people and injuring 42.

The One-Two-Go Airlines plane was carrying 123 passengers, two pilots and five attendants from Bangkok. It landed in heavy rain and veered off the runway, before hitting an earth embankment, breaking into two and bursting into flames.

The 12-year-old McDonnell Douglas MD-82 plane that served flight OG/OX269 left Don Mueang airport at 2.30pm before crash-landing on arrival at 3.40pm.

Only 44 passengers were Thai. The other 79 passengers were foreigners.

Witnesses said the plane seemed to abort its first landing attempt. However, it skidded when it touched the runway, before hitting the embankment.

Wreckage was strewn over a large area. Rescuers battled smoke and intense heat to remove bodies of the dead, and evacuate the injured.

A pilot informed the control tower that he would abort the first landing attempt because he could not see the runway.

According to witnesses, a fire broke out on the right wing while the plane was slipping from the runway. The fire went out, but then re-ignited until flames covered most of the aircraft.

Many of the dead perished in their seats, and were found with their seatbelts fastened. Other passengers, mainly from the rear of the aircraft, jumped from windows, or squeezed through jagged openings in the fuselage.

Some made it out through the plane's emergency exits.

The plane had flown in from Bangkok in mid-afternoon in heavy rain and low visibility.

"The pilot asked to go around," said Chaisak Angsuwan, director-general of the Aviation Department. "The control tower allowed it but the aircraft fell to the runway and the body broke."

Rescue workers had put out the blaze by 5.20pm, then kept evacuating survivors and removing bodies. The airport was closed and about 20 flights were cancelled immediately.

Dr Tinakorn Pongwiwat, adviser of the Narenthorn rescue centre in Phuket, said injured passengers were admitted to Thalang Hospital, Bangkok Hospital Phuket, Vachira Phuket Hospital and Siriroj Hospital.

Most injured passengers suffered impact injuries and burns. The injured foreigners included Australian, English, Dutch, German, Iranian, Israeli and Irish nationalities, according to hospital officials.

The bodies of the dead victims, some badly burnt, were gathered at Phuket airport for an initial

autopsy.

Mr Chaisak initially attributed the accident to heavy rains and strong winds at Phuket airport. Inquiries will focus on communication between pilots and the control tower, and flight recordings.

One-Two-Go Airlines chief executive Udom Tantiprasongchai said he was shocked, and expressed regret for the accident. He would arrange compensation for victims and relatives.

"I would like to express my deep sorrow to the relatives of the dead and I will take full responsibility," he said upon arrival in Phuket last night.

Airline staff and insurance officials headed to Phuket airport to arrange compensation as the airline opened a 1126 hotline centre and a coordination centre at Don Mueang airport to answer inquiries.

Phuket airport director Pornchai Ua-aree said the airport would stay closed today until the accident site was cleared.

He said the accident took place in heavy rain. However, visibility remained at 3-4 kilometres and the winds were not so strong, about 11 knots or 19 kilometres an hour. He said the airplane's tyres touched the runway but it slid 60 metres from the tarmac. Then its right wing hit the earth wall before the plane caught fire.

Tourism and Sports Minister Suvit Yodmani said the lists of killed and injured foreign passengers were being reported to the countries concerned last night.

Chantra Purnriksha, secretary-general of the Office of the Insurance Commission, said the airplane was rented from abroad and insured with foreign agencies. Forensic police chief Pol Maj-Gen Saengchai Suwatthanapakdi suggested relatives send in personal documents and medical records of dead passengers to help with identification. Forensic staff will arrive at Phuket airport today.

Authorities yet to identify 13 bodies

18 SEPTEMBER 2007

DNA matching needed for charred bodies

Authorities have not yet identified 13 out of 89 people killed in Sunday's airliner crash in Phuket, saying those charred bodies must be identified through DNA matching.

Nitinai Sorasongkhram, a Phuket-based forensic officer, said 13 of the 89 bodies were totally burnt. His team would collect tissue samples from the bodies and wait for relatives to match their DNAs with the samples.

Acting national police chief Seripisuth Temiyavej said rescue workers have retrieved all dead bodies from the wreckage of the crashed plane. He also set up a body identification panel, chaired by Pol Lt-Gen Potjanee Sunthornket of the Police Hospital.

He said the forensic team should finish identifying all the dead as soon as charred bodies can be identified from DNA samples, fingerprints and teeth.

Pol Gen Seripisuth also assigned his deputy, Patcharawat Wongsuwan, to head a team that would find out if the crash was caused by any human error or recklessness.

Local authorities said relatives have already claimed the bodies of 36 Thai passengers, two Israelis and one Indonesian. The remaining 50 bodies are being kept at a multi-purpose building of Phuket international airport.

Relatives who want to have the bodies of their loved ones flown home may seek assistance for free-of-charge air transport from the cargo section of Thai Airways International, officials said.

Meanwhile, Foreign Ministry deputy spokesman Piriya Khempon said the ministry has set up a coordination centre to assist relatives of foreign passengers on board the crashed airliner as well as embassy staff. The centre could be reached at Tel 0-2644-7245 and 0-2643-5522.

According to local authorities, among the 89 dead victims were five senior officials based in Phuket and Phangnga. They were two judges and three provincial office heads.

One-Two-Go Airlines chief executive Udom Tantiprasongchai said the airline is focusing its effort on taking care of the injured passengers.

The airline will take responsibility for all passengers stranded at Phuket international airport. It also will take care of travel and accommodation expenses incurred by relatives who travel to Phuket to claim the bodies of those killed in the plane crash or to look after the injured.

Kongkiat Ketphet, director of Bangkok-Phuket Hospital, said four of 22 injured passengers admitted to his hospital were in serious conditions.

The hospital's medical team was closely monitoring the four patients now in its critical care unit. It also asked its sister BNH Hospital in Bangkok to send specialists to reinforce the team in Phuket, said Dr Kongkiat.

After Sunday's plane crash, Phuket international airport was closed as authorities worked to retrieve dead bodies from the aircraft's wreckage and clear debris from the runway. As a result, 54 flights

scheduled to land yesterday were cancelled. Out-bound passengers were transferred to board their planes from Krabi airport instead.

Crash kills 5 from same family

19 SEPTEMBER 2007

They all lived under same roof in Phuket

ARTHIT KHENMEE & WASSAYOS NGARMKHAM

The Phuket air crash has left one home in the resort province almost empty as five members of the same family died in the blazing wreckage. For businessman Pipat Tunyakarn, the tragedy has taken too many people who were closest to his heart.

The crash of the One-Two-Go budget airliner in Phuket killed Mr Pipat's mother Yajai Tunyakarn, aunt Puengboon Ratanadilok na Phuket, sister-in-law Wannaporn Boonsoong, and two maternal relatives, Sirikorn and Somluck Anyasakul, who were married.

Except for the sister-in-law, everyone lived under the same roof in Phuket and all five who perished ran the family business together.

Mr Pipat had moved out of the house after he was married.

The five and Mr Pipat were in Nonthaburi for a business seminar at the Muang Thong Thani convention centre last Friday.

The seminar ended on Sunday and his five relatives caught the doomed One-Two-Go flight OG269 back home to Phuket.

Mr Pipat drove to Bangkok for the meeting and was driving back to Phuket when he heard the tragic news.

The aftermath of the crash has left Mr Pipat in shock. He now has only his grandfather, who suffers from Alzheimer's, and two young kids left in the house.

"There's now only grandpa alone. He is old and has Alzheimer's. So I must move back in and find someone to take care of grandpa. I must also run the family business alone because all the pillars of the family are gone," Mr Pipat said.

The man said his wife had a dream some time ago they would lose many of their immediate relatives. But Mr Pipat had dismissed the possibility the dream was an omen.

After he heard about the crash, he tried to call his five relatives but to no avail. By midnight, it was clear he had lost them all.

"The weather was very bad that day. It was raining heavily and the wind was strong. The pilots should not have landed the plane in such conditions," Mr Pipat said.

He said he had caught a One-Two-Go flight before and thought the seats were too close together.

He thought that if there had been more space between the rows of seats, passengers might have had a better chance of surviving.

The bodies of the five family members have been placed in coffins at Wat Latthiwaram temple in Phuket for funeral rites. Mr Pipat complained that One-Two-Go staff had not contacted him yet to

offer any assistance.

If no one stepped forward to show responsibility by Monday, which is the day of the funerals, Mr Pipat said he was prepared to file a lawsuit.

Mr Pipat's aunt Paphawee Phumipong said airline staff had only sought her phone number and done nothing else. She praised government officials for providing her family with assistance in locating the bodies of her dead relatives.

Financial compensation guaranteed for all victims

18 SEPTEMBER 2007

One-Two-Go Airlines and the Civil Aviation Department have guaranteed financial compensation for all victims of Sunday's plane crash.

A notice in Thai and English posted on the budget airline's website yesterday expressed regret for the accident and said it would "definitely provide support and take full responsibility" for all injured and dead passengers.

The airline's chief executive officer and founder Udom Tantiprasongchai also promised the victims' relatives the company would meet all expenses when he visited Phuket immediately after the tragedy.

Civil Aviation chief Chaisak Angkhasuwan said the airline must pay the relatives of each dead victim 100,000 baht for funeral expenses as soon as possible.

The airline's insurance company would have to cover the medical expenses of the survivors, Mr Chaisak said.

The airline carries more than US\$300 million (10.2 billion baht) in insurance cover with UK based-underwriter Penloyd. The insurance covers damage to the aircraft, passengers and third parties, Mr Chaisak said.

Chantra Purnriksha, secretary-general of the Office of the Insurance Commission, said the airline had two accident insurance policies with Penloyd.

In addition to the \$300-million insurance covering passengers for death, medical expenses and transport after an accident, it had another policy, worth US\$5 million, covering damage on the aircraft and its passengers.

She said the commission would work closely with Penloyd to determine the actual cause of the crash.

Staff from Penloyd's Singapore office were expected to fly into Phuket soon, Ms Chantra said.

Ms Chantra said the insurance commission would also work with the General Insurance Association and the Thai Life Assurance Association to ensure rapid disbursement of payments to relatives of passengers who purchased accident insurance policies.

Passengers' relatives seeking help could phone the insurance commission's Phuket centre at 076-219-496, 081-174-8960 or call its hotline at 1186.

The Justice Ministry's Rights and Liberties Protection Department has also sent a team to Phuket to assist victims' relatives with legal matters, the director-general, Suwana Suwannajutha, said.

King, Queen give B800,000 to hospitals

18 SEPTEMBER 2007

Their Majesties the King and the Queen have donated a total of 800,000 baht to three hospitals in Phuket where injured passengers from Sunday's plane crash are being treated.

The Queen's secretary, Thanphuying Manatnit Vanikkul, sent a letter advising of the donation to Phuket governor Niran Kalayanamit, who will present the cash to the three hospitals.

The money is for the purchase of medical supplies and other necessities.

Bangkok Phuket hospital will receive 500,000 baht, Phuket International hospital (formerly Siriroj hospital) 200,000 baht and Vachiraphuket hospital 100,000 baht.

Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont flew to Phuket yesterday afternoon on board an air force C-130 aircraft to visit the injured victims.

"I just want to visit the injured. My trip is not aimed at boosting confidence [of airlines]," he said early in the day.

He also pledged to provide full assistance and necessary support to victims.

"The government will see how it can be of any help, especially in transportation. If people want to seek treatment in Bangkok, we can arrange for that," the premier said.

Gen Surayud insisted the aviation system at Phuket airport meets international standards.

"Accidents can happen, but we must be careful to minimise the chances. I can assure you Phuket airport meets international standards and is second only to Suvarnabhumi airport," he said.

Sunday's crash would serve as another lesson for Thai aviation, which has been trying to improve its efficiency.

The prime minister met relatives of crash victims at Don Mueang airport yesterday morning before boarding his flight to Phuket in the afternoon.

Gen Surayud said he will discuss with the Foreign Ministry about sending condolence messages to the families of foreigners killed in the crash.

MD-80 DOES NOT HAVE FREQUENT CRASH HISTORY

18 SEPTEMBER 2007

BOONSONG KOSITCHOTETHANA

The US-made McDonnell Douglas MD-80 series aircraft like the one that crashed in Phuket on Sunday does not have a poor safety record or a history of frequent crashes.

Since the mid-size, medium-range airliner, with the distinctive feature of having two rear fuselage-mounted turbofan engines, small wings and a T-tail, was introduced in 1980s, it has been involved only four accidents. Three, including Sunday's One-Two-Go tragedy, involved fatalities.

The three previous incidents were:

- On Dec 27, 1991, SAS flight 751, an MD-81 aircraft, OY-KHO "Dana Viking" crash-landed in Gottrra, Sweden.

In the initial climb, both engines ingested ice breaking loose from the wings, which had not been properly de-iced before departure. Both engines were destroyed, leaving the aircraft with no propulsion. The aircraft landed in a field and broke into three parts. No fire broke out and all aboard the plane survived.

- On Jan 31, 2000, Alaska Airlines Flight 261, an MD-83 aircraft, crashed in the Pacific Ocean, about 4.3km north of Anacapa Island, California, due to the inadequate maintenance of the jackscrew assembly.

The two pilots, three cabin crew, and 83 passengers on board were killed, and the airplane was destroyed.

- On Oct 8, 2001, SAS flight SK686, an MD-87 aircraft, SE-DMA, collided with a small Cessna jet during take-off at Linate Airport, Milan, Italy.

The Linate Airport disaster left 114 people dead. It has been established that the cause of the accident was a misunderstanding between air traffic controllers and the Cessna jet, and that the SAS crew had no role in causing the accident. Another factor was the ground movement radar not being in operation at the time of the accident.

The MD-80 series has been used by major airlines around the world, including American Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Swissair, Alitalia, Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), Finnair, Iberia and Korean Air.

However, many of these carriers began to retire this type of aircraft from 2000 and replace them with newer and more fuel-efficient jetliners.

As of May 2007, a total of 1,051 MD-80 series and variant MD-90 aircraft were in airline service. Production of the MD-80 ended in 1999.

The aircraft is well-liked by many pilots, including those in Thailand, for its strong structure, stability and powerful engines but its high fuel consumption has become a major drawback.

One-Two-Go has seven MD-82 aircraft in its fleet, according to its website.

Mixed emotions after missing doomed flight

18 SEPTEMBER 2007

WASSAYOS NGAMKHAM and PIRADA PASRIWONG

Missing your flight can sometimes be the best bit of luck that you will ever have in your whole life.

Kratin Ramrong, 32, an employee at Phuket Rajabhat University, was supposed to be on board the One-Two-Go plane that crashed with the loss of so many lives in Phuket on Sunday.

She had travelled to visit her relatives in Bangkok last weekend and was scheduled to fly back to Phuket on Sunday on the ill-fated flight OG-269.

On Sunday morning she bought a tour package taking her on a trip around the Rattanakosin Old Town area and to Wat Phra Kaew and then on a boat trip along the Chao Phraya river to Koh Kret in Nonthaburi.

On the return trip, the boat was late and did not pick up its passengers on time. As she was definitely going to miss her flight, she contacted the tour agency and cancelled her reservation.

"It sent shivers down my spine to learn of the crash later in the evening. Despite being lucky, I could not feel happy when I found out how many people died," she said.

Several survivors yesterday gave their accounts of the crash.

Chavit Jitchamngong, 11, feels no joy at having survived. The boy and his father Chawalert narrowly escaped death but the boy lost his mother who died as the plane went up in flames.

A Prathom 6 student in Phuket, Chavit had travelled with his parents to Bangkok to attend an air-conditioner exhibition at Bitec exhibition centre.

The flight home was uneventful, he said, but as the aircraft touched down, it shook so violently that his mother, Siriputh, put him on her lap and held him as firmly as she could.

"Then the plane crashed. Everyone screamed. I collapsed on the floor and could not see my parents because of the thick smoke. Then I saw the flames rushing in," Chavit said.

He saw light coming from an opening near the wing and crawled toward it. He got outside, where he met his father.

"I am still sad. I wanted to help my mother but I couldn't. There was a lot of smoke," Chavit said. "I would be much happier if I could have my mother back."

Prinwit Chusaeng, 23, a hotel worker, was another survivor. He said the accident happened very quickly and the violent crash knocked some passengers unconscious. That was why so many did not escape, he said.

Chatri Suksawat, 26, from Phangnga, said the pilot did not issue any warnings before the plane landed. The atmosphere inside the plane was normal, he said.

However, he said he noticed there was gusting wind and rain outside.

"When the plane hit the earth embankment, my girlfriend and I ran for the emergency exit. I used my leg to force open the exit and left the plane minutes before it was engulfed in flames."

21 SEPTEMBER 2007

Airline cuts flights as it attends to victims

ACHADTAYA CHUENNIRAN

One-Two-Go Airlines has substantially cut the number of its daily flights as its staff have to visit the injured and families of the victims of the Sunday crash in Phuket.

Airline chief executive Udom Tantiprasongchai yesterday said the cut-back, from 40 flights to 30 per day, will continue for the next few weeks. This is meant to speed up the process of compensating families of the dead and injured victims of the crash.

Mr Udom said fewer than 10 severely injured crash victims remained in hospital yesterday, including three now in intensive care units.

Initially, all survivors would receive 50,000 baht each from the airline as a consolation payment, he said.

This was recommended by the airline's insurer in line with international standards, he added.

For every dead victim, One-Two-Go promises to arrange for US\$150,000 (about 5 million baht) in compensation from its insurer.

The airline is also responsible for the transport of all bodies.

Of the 53 dead foreigners, 11 bodies have left Thailand.

Mr Udom also urged all sides to wait for the official outcome of the investigation to establish the cause of the plane crash, saying any speculation before the official conclusion comes out is unfair.

Wuthichai Singhamanee, director for air transport safety standards, said he had gathered information from the local air traffic control tower, and the meteorological unit supervising the western coast of the South and Phuket airport.

He will wait for interpretation of the aircraft's flight data recordings, then compare it with the gathered data.

Mr Wuthichai said the cause of the air crash is expected to be established in about 10 days.

Autopsy official Nitinai Somsongkram said collection of forensic samples for identification of dead victims has been completed, and the data would be matched with information obtained from relatives of the victims.

More than 10 bodies were burnt and must be identified through DNA matching, he added.

The bodies of all 36 Thai victims have been identified and released, he said.

The Mental Health Department is sending staff to follow up on the mental condition of survivors and relatives of the crash victims.

Regional mental health chief Dr Veera Churujiporn said the survivors and relatives could suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and may need help overcoming grief.

The Bangkok-Phuket flight OG269 of no-frills One-Two-Go Airlines crashed while landing in heavy rain at Phuket international airport last Sunday, killing 89 of 130 people on board.

21 September 2007

Survivors squeeze through holes, windows

POST REPORTERS

Phuket _ As panic-stricken survivors scrambled from the burning plane, one aged couple jumped from a window and others squeezed out through a split in the twisted and broken fuselage of One-Two-Go flight OG 269.

All told, 42 passengers managed to escape from the blazing wreck at Phuket airport.

Rescue teams carried scores of charred bodies to nearby hospitals for identification.

"Most of the dead were still in their seats and had their safety belts on," said Chalermkiat, a rescuer who searched the front section of the plane for survivors and bodies.

The passengers had fastened their seat belts to prepare for landing and most never had a chance to take them off and get to the emergency doors.

The tragedy happened so quickly. The plane appeared to lose equilibrium, veered off the runway, crashed against an earth wall and burst into flames.

The impact knocked most of the passengers unconscious. Those still able to move staggered out of the burning, smoking wreckage of the plane through holes in the fuselage or from emergency windows.

"I took my unconscious wife and jumped out of an [emergency] window," said Nong Khaonuan, 57, whose ear was torn and his shoulder injured.

"When I looked back I saw only flames," Mr Nong said.

"I don't think anyone could have survived in the front section of the plane which took the heaviest blow in the crash."

Ambulances and emergency units took almost an hour to reach the airport because of the heavy rain and the long drive from Muang Phuket.

"It took about an hour to reach the injured," Mr Nong's son, Tanawat Fongsrisin, confirmed.

John O'Donnell, an Irish tourist, said he and his friend escaped through an emergency door. He had burns on his back and legs.

He said his friend was being treated at a hospital.

A Thai passenger, Chawalert Jitjamnong, who suffered back injury fleeing the chaos, said the plane's captain had notified the passengers the "weather was very bad and he could see nothing" only a short time before he lost control of the plane and it went skidding off the runway.

"I just followed the light and finally got out through a crack under the plane's wing," he told TITV.

Other airlines suspended their Phuket flights after the crash.

Officials working quickly to restore confidence among tourists

18 SEPTEMBER 2007

CHADAMAS CHINMANEEVONG

Sunday's air crash should have only a short-term impact on travellers' confidence in the low-cost airline business, according to Pattanapong Aikwanich, an adviser to the Phuket Tourist Association.

Clarification of service standards and safety is crucial for restoring confidence, he said.

"No one wants to see an air accident, but it can happen. What matters is whether the accident was the result of uncontrollable factors or substandard service," said Mr Pattanapong, a former chairman of the association.

"Personally, I think the accident happened because of bad weather at the time of the landing."

Phuket International Airport formally reopened for service yesterday afternoon following the Sunday afternoon crash of a One-Two-Go plane in which 89 people were killed.

Mr Pattanapong said he believed confidence would return because people must travel and air transport is the safest and the most convenient method, while air accidents are also rare.

Local travel agents noted several postponements and cancellations yesterday from local travellers, but few from foreign tourists. The agents believe that the airlines have measures in place to deal with short-and long-term concerns.

A One-To-Go employee said yesterday that most of its customers had postponed their flights indefinitely and some had cancelled.

However, at the moment the company would not be able to make full refunds for cancelled tickets but could only refund the airport tax, the employee added.

Mr Pattanapong said that tourists planning to visit Phuket had not cancelled their hotel and air ticket reservations for the upcoming high season. However, local people are now talking about fortune and spirits.

Last year a total of 4.49 million tourists visited Phuket, 2.88 million of them foreigners. On average each tourist stays in Phuket for four days and spends 3,900 baht.

Total tourist arrivals to Phuket by air were 2.06 million in 2006, compared with around one million in 2005, reflecting the travel slump following the December 2004 tsunami.

21 SEPTEMBER 2007

Low-cost airlines have sound safety standards, says minister

MONGKOL BANGPRAPA & AMORN RAT MAHITTHIROOK

Deputy Transport Minister Sansern Wongcha-um yesterday sought to reassure travellers the safety standards of low-cost airlines in Thailand are sound. He was responding to doubts about the safety of budget airlines raised by a member of the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) in the wake of Sunday's horrendous crash of a One-Two-Go Airlines plane in Phuket.

In the Legislative Assembly yesterday, Somchai Waengkarn asked if budget airlines had tried to maximise their competitiveness by cutting costs so much that aircraft maintenance and overall safety were compromised.

"One-Two-Go Airlines has 14 aircraft. Six of them serve international flights and eight fly locally. They serve 42 flights, so each of them makes 5-6 flights a day," he said.

"I wonder if this is in line with aviation standards and influences pilots' decisions to land as pilots must meet the required [flight] frequency."

Mr Somchai said some budget airlines reduced fares so much they almost matched those charged by inter-provincial buses.

The fare for a Bangkok-Phuket flight was 1,700 baht, compared to a bus fare on the same route of 1,100 baht, he said.

"The standard of low-cost airlines must be improved to boost passengers' confidence," Mr Somchai said.

"Even though the [crashed] aircraft was insured, the accident has caused severe damage to the nation."

Mr Sansern said budget airlines must meet the same safety standards for regular airlines in terms of aircraft, pilots and flight operations.

The airlines must meet safety standards set by the Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation.

However, transport officials would review existing measures next week to make sure, he added.

Investigations to find the cause of the crash were underway, focussing on communication between pilots and the air traffic control tower, flight data recordings and survivors' accounts.

Victims and relatives were getting excellent assistance from authorities. Rescue services had been able to reach the crash site three minutes faster than the standard, Mr Sansern said.

Gen Saprang Kalayanamitr, chairman of Airports of Thailand, yesterday proposed to AoT management that surveillance cameras be installed along runways to capture take-offs and landings.

This would assist investigations into any future plane crashes and help improve the standard of safety measures and rescue operations, he said.

Acting AoT president Kulya Pakakrong said the management would consider if this and other changes

were necessary.

The AoT would find out just how much equipment would be needed at airports to enable the staff to work more effectively in event of emergencies.

For example, there may need to be more forklifts available at airports, Mrs Kulya said.

Wind shear alert was down

19 SEPTEMBER 2007

Officials say system not crucial for landing

POST REPORTERS

Systems to detect dangerous winds at Phuket international airport have emerged as a new factor possibly linked to the horrendous crash of the One-Two-Go flight on Sunday.

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"Three out of six low-level wind shear alert systems were not working at the time," Mr Wuttichai said in a report by the AP.

An official at Phuket airport who declined to be named told the Bangkok Post that the system run by the Meteorological Department had not functioned for months.

The systems detect sudden strong winds, also known as wind shear, which could cause trouble for a plane landing at the airport.

Officials responsible for the system would normally alert air traffic controllers to warn pilots about the situation on the ground.

These systems are installed at all international airports in Thailand. They are located in areas around the airport.

With investigators still trying to determine the cause of the tragedy, it was unclear yesterday whether the accident, which left 89 people dead and 41 injured, was due to pilot error or weather conditions.

But Mr Wuttichai said even though the wind shear detection system was not fully functional, this would not necessarily lead to an accident.

The airport at Phuket was also equipped with its own, separate wind detecting system and could inform incoming and outgoing planes of the situation, the official said.

"The wind shear alert system is not a requirement for an international aviation standard," he said.

A pilot of Thai Airways International (THAI), who asked not to be named, agreed with Mr Wuttichai, saying the wind shear detection system was not crucial for landing or take-off.

Most passenger aircraft nowadays were equipped with their own wind detection equipment, which the pilot could refer to, he said.

Transport permanent secretary Chaisawat Kittipornpaiboon, who is heading the inquiry into the disaster, said wind shear had not been ruled out and it had been the cause of several major airline accidents.

Transport and aviation authorities yesterday appealed to the public not to point the finger at Arief Mulyadi, the chief pilot on the fatal flight.

