

Ethiopian Airlines completes first 737 MAX flight since 2019 crash

February 1 2022, by Robbie Corey-Boulet



The Ethiopian Airlines plane crashed just minutes after takeoff in March 2019.

Ethiopian Airlines on Tuesday flew the Boeing 737 MAX for the first time since a crash nearly three years ago killed all 157 people on board and triggered the global grounding of the aircraft.

Flight 302 from Addis Ababa to Nairobi plunged six minutes after take-off into a field southeast of the Ethiopian capital in March 2019, five months after a similar crash in Indonesia left 189 people dead.

The twin disasters and subsequent scrutiny of the 737 MAX's faulty flight handling system—known as the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS)—amounted to the worst crisis in Boeing's history.

State-owned Ethiopian Airlines, the jewel of the economy of Africa's second most populous country, had long said it would be the last carrier to use the single-aisle jets again.

In a statement to AFP this week, the airline said the decision to resume 737 MAX flights came after "intense recertification" by regulators in the United States, the European Union, China and Ethiopia.

It also provided a list of 35 other carriers that have also begun operating the jet again.

Tuesday's flight was initially set to head to Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, but bad weather forced a route change to a four-hour "scenic flight" in Ethiopian airspace.

The trip involved passing near Mount Zuqualla, an extinct volcano, on the way towards the Bale Mountains before returning to Addis Ababa.

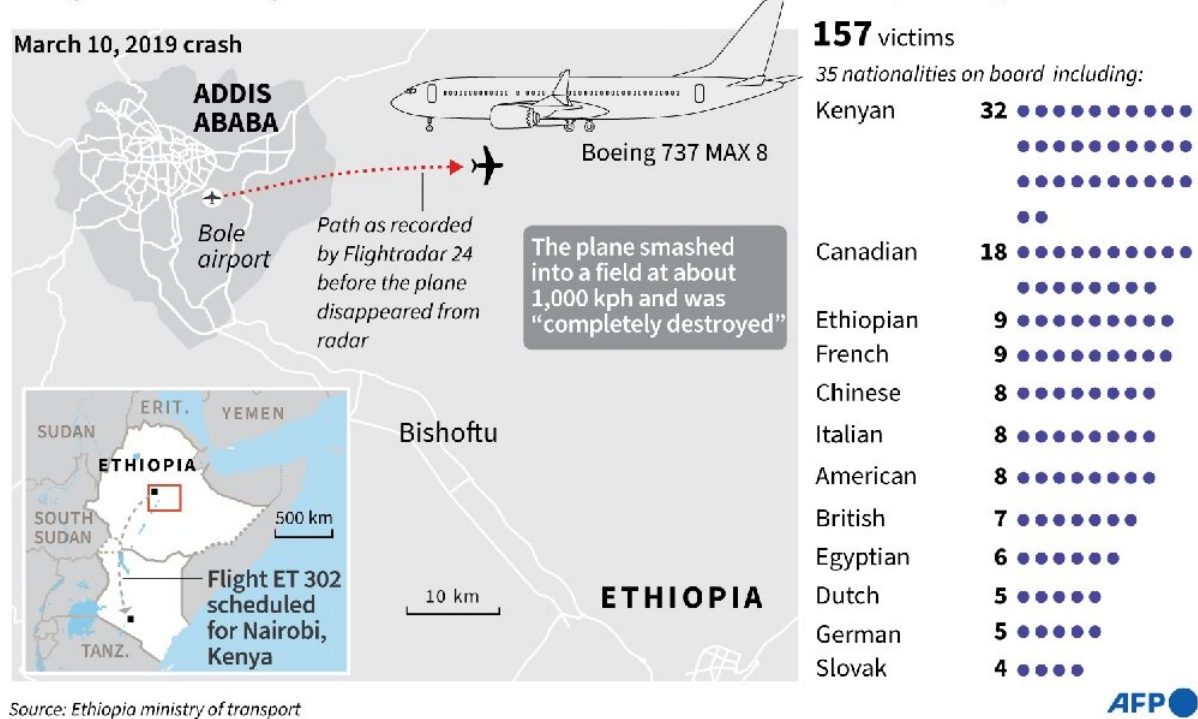
Airline and Boeing representatives on board, along with US ambassador Geeta Pasi, were offered champagne and a three-course meal featuring doro wat, a spicy chicken stew.

White sheet cakes bore the words "ETHIOPIAN B737 MAX RETURN TO SERVICE" in black icing, and women ululated in joy as they were

cut just before the plane's descent.

2019 Ethiopian Airlines crash

Boeing has reached an agreement with the families of victims and has admitted responsibility



2019 Ethiopian Airlines crash.

'Open wound'

For some who lost loved ones three years ago, however, the day was less than festive.

The victims of the Flight 302 crash, the worst in Ethiopia's history, hailed from more than 30 countries, with the largest number from neighbouring Kenya.

Virginie Fricaudet, president of an association of French victims' families, said she expected Tuesday's milestone to be painful.

"What I find very difficult for us is that this day of the first flight, there will be a communique about the flight and all of the VIPS who are on board, but for the families who lost loved ones there is just an open wound," Fricaudet said.

She lost her brother in the disaster, which claimed the lives of nine French citizens.

"We are now three years from the crash, the plane has been recertified, the life of the 737 MAX is going well. But the families don't have compensation. Nothing has happened for the families."

Boeing has reached an agreement with the victims' families and accepted responsibility for the tragedy, according to legal documents filed in November in Chicago, where the company is headquartered.

The proposed agreement did not mention specific sums, as jurors will be responsible for assessing amounts.

Darren A. Hulst, vice president of marketing at Boeing who was on Tuesday's flight, told AFP he had no information on compensation.



The victims of the crash hailed from more than 30 countries.

"I am not involved in that part, so I probably can't comment other than to say our hearts go out to the families and friends of those who lost their lives," he said.

"We've worked tirelessly since then to make sure this aircraft is among the safest aircraft in the world."

Easing tensions

Ethiopian Airlines, Africa's leading carrier, had four of the 737 MAX jets in its fleet at the time of the 2019 crash.

Tensions between the airline and Boeing soared in the immediate aftermath, with Ethiopian pushing back on suggestions the tragedy resulted from pilot error.

On Tuesday, representatives from both companies denied there was any lingering bad blood.

Asked about the relationship now, Ethiopia's acting chief commercial officer Esayas Woldemariam Hailu told AFP: "The crash does not define it."

The airline's decision to wait as long as it did before flying the 737 MAX again was "really commendable", said Yeshiwas Fentahun, who was president of Ethiopia's independent pilots' association in 2019 but is no longer with the company.

The loss of the flight crew—including its youngest captain, Yared Getachew—was traumatic for all employees, he said.

"There were pilots who were close to the people who lost their lives in the accident, and it's really hard to say if everyone has moved past that experience," he said.

"But I believe it's a reasonable time for most of us to move past that experience."

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