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Cluster of air crashes raises safety fears

By Filita Clark, Aerospace Correspondent

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Four fatal air crashes in the past two weeks have lifted the number of significant deadly commercial airline accidents so far this year above that for the whole of 2009, casting

Nearly 70 people have died since August 16 in crashes in Colombia, Nepal, China and the Democratic Republic of Congo, taking the total number of fatal accidents to 13 this year, says London-based **Ascend**, one of the world's leading aviation consultancies.

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Last year there were 10 crashes according to Ascend, which tracks fatal accidents as far back as 1946 involving aircraft with paying passengers and 15 or more seats, but not those caused by acts of violence.

The number of fatal crashes has hovered around 13 or 14 since 2006, Ascend's database shows, well below the 40 and even 50-plus deadly accidents seen annually in the late 1940s, and sometimes in later decades.

Similarly, the annual number of deaths from these accidents – about 600 this year, close to the same as last year – is similar to or lower than the numbers seen in the late 1940s and 1950s, even though millions more people fly now than then.

But even as air safety experts insist flying has become safer, it may not always seem so, especially after a sudden cluster of accidents.

The recent spate of crashes is not that unusual. US air safety expert Todd Curtis, who wrote "Understanding Aviation Safety Data" and tracks airline incidents at airsafe.com, says that, since the site started tracking significant crashes in 1996, in all but two years there were periods where there were three or more crashes separated by 10 days or less.

Nor do there seem to be many common factors behind the incidents, or others in the past month.

Mr Curtis says all four crashes of large jets over the past month – in China, Colombia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – occurred during landing, "but beyond that there are no obvious connections".

In fact, most accidents are due to several contributing causes and only rarely is there just one very clear cause, he says.

Paul Hayes, director of air safety at Ascend, says the most common feature of all this year's fatal accidents was poor weather and/or darkness, and less well-equipped airfields.

"This in itself should not result in an accident but it does reduce the margin for error," he says, adding little is known about what precisely happened in each case, so it is impossible to know the exact cause of each.

What is known, he says, is that flying is very safe today, especially in wealthy countries. "The fatal accident rate to airline passengers is now probably something like one in 10 to 15 million for main airlines in North America and western Europe," he says.

The chance of being killed in an air crash there is about the same as winning the jackpot on the lottery, he adds.



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"The fatal accident rate in less developed areas, say on an ad hoc domestic flight between minor towns in the Congo, is perhaps two orders of magnitude worse, say one in 100,000 or 200,000.

"But this was probably the fatal accident rate in Europe when I first flew as a passenger as a small boy in 1957 and we thought airlines were 'safe' then."

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