

## SAFETY IN COLOMBIA

COLOMBIAN COMMERCIAL air transport has a poor safety record by average world standards. This has been spotlighted by the US Federal Aviation Administration's International Air Safety Assessment Programme (IASAP), which gave Colombia's civil-aviation authority (Aeronautica Civil) only a Category 2 "conditional" rating for safety-oversight standards. Keen to earn its IASAP Cat 1 rating, which affects US-Colombia services and perceptions of Colombian air travel, the Aeronautica Civil is recertifying all Colombian airlines. So far, only Avianca and ACES have undergone the renewed scrutiny. Lenis believes that other Colombian-registered airlines, with their older fleets, will find the experience more expensive, including the pressure to upgrade their crew-training. He is confident, however, that the FAA will award the

Aeronautica Civil a Cat 1 rating.

IATA has described Avianca and Varig as two Latin American airlines which have a pro-active approach to safety. Lenis himself takes it extremely seriously, explaining: "Safety, like any other management task such as sales or marketing, has to be led from the top."

It is part of marketing, Lenis implies, when he says: "Customers are looking at this issue closely. If you have an accident the press are all over you." He adds: "We don't need to hire pilots on short-term contracts like the others do. To fly with Avianca is different. We have set ourselves a standard." Personnel-selection standards are set high, says Lenis, describing basic pilot selection: "They come to us with a twin rating. We test them using a Fokker 50 simulator. If they pass, they are an Avianca pilot. If they fail, well..." He shrugs,

adding: "This is another reason why we cannot grow fast."

Avianca has a flight-safety committee (FSC) which meets fortnightly. Guido Fuentes, the aeronautical engineering flight-safety executive officer on the FSC, says: "If we ask him for funding we get it. [Lenis] attends all our meetings."

When IATA was looking for a venue to hold its safety committee meeting, Avianca offered to sponsor the event in Cartagena, Colombia. Sponsorship of the February meeting enabled it to be an open airline-safety seminar of a type never offered before: there was no registration fee. The result was unprecedentedly high Latin American airline participation which delighted IATA (*Flight International*, 12-18 March, P26). Lenis says: "This event has one major objective: to bring the attention of Avianca's captains to the issues."

of employees is 3,200. A decade ago, the fleet contained four Boeing 747s, one of them a freighter; today the largest aircraft in the fleet is its single Boeing 767-300ER, and the only other widebodies in the fleet are three 767-200ERs.

The cuts caused "a lot of pain", says Lenis, but were forced on Avianca by domestic and international competition which drove the Bogota-based airline into losses. Once, Avianca was Colombia's only carrier; now it is the nation's only major international airline. The only international exception is Medellin-based Aerolineas Centrales de Colombia (ACES) which, although mainly a domestic operator, flies to Miami, in the USA, and to Puerto Rico.

The fact that Viasa Venezuelan International Airlines has declared bankruptcy and receivers are being appointed is testimony to the difficulty of life in the South American market. Lenis says that he does not see Viasa re-emerging in any form without solving "its labour problems".

No-one is having an easy time, says Lenis, not even such a prominent carrier as Brazil's Varig. Meanwhile, Ecuador's Ecuatoriana has, as Lenis puts it, been "grounded" for three years. Fellow Ecuadorian airline SAETA took its pick of Ecuatoriana's routes, and its majority shareholder, the Brazilian carrier VASP, is operating some of the remaining services with one aircraft. Also during the past 12 months, Lan Chile, smarting from a withdrawal of Iberia's equity, has put Ladeco Chilean Airlines into administration.

## TRAFFIC INCREASES

Given the apparent promise of the South American market, this all seems slightly unreal. Passenger traffic is increasing at well above the world average rate, both internationally within the continent, and to Europe and North America. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) 1995 figures for growth in

those three route areas are, respectively, 12.5%, 19.9% and 19.4%. Internationally within South America, however, capacity measured in available seat-kilometres (ASK) has burgeoned, showing a growth rate of 31.3%, presumably because of competition. The routes to Europe and North America look better, with ASKs growing more slowly than passenger traffic.

Lenis believes that the future of air transport in Latin America lies in strategic alliances, but notes that there is precious little co-operation in the continent. "It is incredible, if you see the way the world is heading, but we just don't talk to each other," he remarks, adding: "Consolidation should be the route to survival." He believes that the South American carriers will be forced to talk to each other eventually. "We

have to look for alliances. We have to look to the big groups," he says. Avianca's only intra-Latin American codeshare agreement is with privately owned SAETA, based in Quito, Ecuador.

## AMERICAN CODESHARE

Lenis signalled his belief in alliances in December 1996 by setting up a codeshare with American Airlines, the most powerful link between North and South America. He remarks: "American's domination is a risk you have to take. You cannot be alone." American operates direct flights from the USA to Bogota, Barranquilla and Cali in Colombia, but Lenis hopes that it will connect with Avianca's domestic network via Bogota if Avianca connects with American via Miami. Already, he points out, 60% of Avianca's passengers to Miami use that airport to change flights.

Many South American carriers are looking for some form of link with American, according to *Airline Business* magazine which notes, however, that Varig has dumped its agreement with Delta Air Lines (because Delta filed for its own Brazilian routes) in favour of one with United Airlines. United has declared its firm intention to go all-out for what it sees as the highly desirable South American market.

Meanwhile, Lenis says that, within South America, he would like to see centralised route planning to achieve a more efficient continental network. He would also like to see co-operation on spares holdings and insurance buying.

Avianca has advantages over competitors, particularly domestic ones, Lenis claims. He explains: "When we see a route, we operate it in a profitable way or we walk out. You can no longer fly just to keep your aircraft in the air." Avianca has a younger fleet than those of the opposition, and Lenis believes that, with slender or non-existent margins, "...it will be difficult for them to update their equipment". □



Having a young fleet has made recertification relatively easy for Avianca