USA TODAY

Arbus, American Airlines in nasty fight over crash

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — The nasty fight between American Airlines and Europe's Airbus over a New York crash in 2001 that killed 265 people has escalated as the U.S. government nears its determination Tuesday on the cause of the second-worst air disaster in U.S. history.

The world's biggest airline has ferociously defended its prestige during a period of unprecedented distress for the industry's domestic giants.

A draft report on the cause of the Flight 587 crash to be considered by the National Transportation Safety Board will focus heavily on crew performance. American pilot training has also been a key issue, as has the design of the doomed plane's flight-control system.

Airbus, the top commercial plane maker, has aggressively challenged claims by the carrier it concealed design and safety information from the late 1990s that American says might have prevented the Nov. 12, 2001, crash.

Airbus also finds itself in the uncomfortable glare of a U.S. crash investigation for the first time, with an advanced design system under scrutiny.

Industry sources say the acrimony between the aviation powerhouses is running unusually high before liability questions are addressed. "You have a feud going on," said one former NTSB member.

The 150-ton Airbus A300-600 plunged into a residential area of Queens shortly after takeoff for the Dominican Republic from John F. Kennedy airport, killing all 260 aboard and five on the ground.

The probe centers on action by co-pilot Sten Molin to stabilize the misaligned nose of the wide-body after it was buffeted during its climb by turbulence from a jumbo jet flying ahead.

American and Airbus only agree with the government's finding that Molin activated multiple full rudder swings in an attempt to control the plane. The aircraft fish-tailed before sliding sideways, like a car skidding on a slippery road. The unsustainable build-up of side forces snapped off the tail fin.

American says Molin performed as he was trained, but the severity of the rudder movement was unintentional. The airline said that the flight-control system was unexpectedly and dangerously sensitive at high speeds, and that it now knows pilots could too easily overuse the rudder and lose control.

"If the NTSB says the pilot use of the rudder was the probable cause, we disagree. He's not the cause of this accident," said American spokesman Bruce Hicks.

The rudder is primarily used at low speeds to counter cross-winds during landing or to help steer the plane on the ground. Airbus says Molin should never have used the rudder to try and stabilize the aircraft and that rudder training at American was inadequate. An Airbus spokesman said the claim of flight-control sensitivity is a "red herring."

In recent days American officials have also pointed to internal Airbus e-mails from a 1997 incident involving another American A300 that indicate certain aerodynamic forces, aggravated by rudder use to regain control of the aircraft, could dangerously stress the tail fin. This information, American says, was never fully disclosed by the manufacturer.

But Airbus documents dispute that conclusion as well as renewed claims by American that Airbus had acted unethically.

"Concerns generated by this incident and the dangers of unnecessary and inappropriate use of rudder were shared by Airbus numerous times in numerous ways with government agencies and American Airlines," said Clay McConnell, an Airbus spokesman.

The safety board cautioned pilots of all aircraft in 2002 about rudder use during certain stages of flight. American has also updated its training practices. Airbus has made no changes to its A300-600 rudder system even though the board recommended one modification that was related to the 1997 incident.