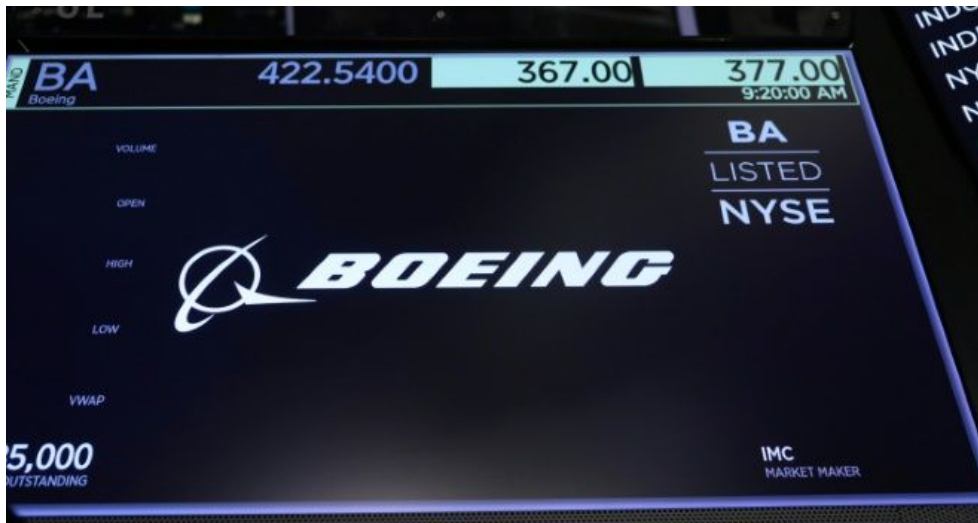


# Grounding the Boeing 737 a touchy subject for US authorities

BY LUC OLINGA (AFP) 22 HOURS AGO IN BUSINESS

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Following Sunday's crash in Ethiopia of another Boeing 737 MAX 8, the second such accident in five months, the flagship US manufacturer faces fresh questions about the planes' airworthiness.

But are US authorities likely to ground these planes, a cash cow for the aerospace giant?



"We have no further updates this morning," a Federal Aviation Administration spokesman told AFP.


That muted response sums up the difficulty American officials face in reassuring the flying public, as passengers take to social media, saying they are afraid to board a 737.

In a sign of how important the matter is, the FAA and the US National Transportation Safety Board have sent officials to Ethiopia to help investigate.

The cause of the crash remains unknown for the instant but the airline says investigators have recovered the black-box flight recorders from the Nairobi-bound jet.

"We don't know anything for certain about this crash at this point but you certainly can't rule out a grounding," said Richard Aboulafia of Teal Group, an aerospace


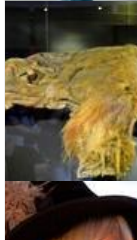
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planes themselves, he added.



Women mourn during a memorial ceremony in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on Monday March 11, 2019

- AFP

But he said US authorities must not yield to political pressure despite Boeing's economic importance as an exporter.

"Politicizing safety is not a good idea," he said.

A 737 MAX 8 operating as Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET302 crashed Sunday southeast of Addis Ababa shortly after takeoff, killing all 157 passengers and crew members aboard.

The same jet model, a more fuel-efficient version of the 737, crashed in late October, leaving 189 people dead, also just moments after takeoff.

Not since the 1970s -- when the McDonnell Douglas DC-10 had successive fatal incidents -- has a new model been involved in two deadly accidents in such a short period.

The causes of the two 737 MAX 8 crashes are not yet known but the planes' Angle of Attack sensors, which provide data about the angle at which air passes over the wings, have come under scrutiny.

- Boeing is 'strategic' -

A malfunction could cause the plane's computers to detect a stall incorrectly and put the plane into a dive when it should climb instead.

Boeing has sent experts to assist in the investigation and has so far delayed the official roll-out of its new long-haul 777X jet, which had been scheduled for Wednesday.



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This year, Boeing also plans to increase the production rate for the 737 MAX to 57 aircraft per month from 52, in order fill 4,661 orders by January.



Some countries have grounded Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft, but most are keeping them in the air  
STEPHEN BRASHEAR, GETTY IMAGES NORTH AMERICA/AFP/File

"Boeing is strategic, it's a tool of trade," said Michel Merluzeau, an analyst at AirInsight.

The 737 MAX also figures in the fraught current US-China trade talks, with American officials urging Beijing to purchase more of the jets and cut America's soaring trade deficit with China, according to media reports.

In this context, China's decision to ground the 737 MAX is not necessarily related to security concerns, Merluzeau said.

In addition to commercial airliners, Boeing also manufactures military aircraft, including the KC-46 Pegasus aerial refueling jet, and is a contractor in US space programs.

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