

Disaster casts doubt on Boeing's recovery plans

Aircraft manufacturer was seeking to turn a corner after blowout and 737-Max crashes

SYLVIA PFEIFER — LONDON

The crash of an Air India flight bound for London came at a pivotal moment for Boeing, which has been struggling with the fallout from a series of safety and production crises.

The cause of the incident of the Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner aircraft is not yet known but the crash could deal a blow to the recovery plans put in place by new chief executive Kelly Ortberg. Boeing shares, which had gained more than 20 per cent since the start of the year, fell 5 per cent yesterday.

Ortberg said yesterday he had spoken to Air India's chair, Natarajan Chandrasekaran, to offer Boeing's "full support". He added: "Our deepest condolences go out to the loved ones of the passengers and crew on board Air India Flight 171, as well as everyone affected in Ahmedabad."

An industry veteran who took the helm last August, Ortberg has sought to stabilise Boeing's production and improve its quality control processes after a door plug on a 737 Max-9 aircraft blew out mid-flight last January.

With that incident coming after two crashes of its 737 Max-8 aircraft in 2018 and 2019 killing 346 people, he vowed to alter the culture of the planemaker.

Although there were no fatalities, last year's blowout raised fresh questions over Boeing's manufacturing issues and quality control. It also led to a clear-out of management and the appointment of Ortberg, a former chief executive of avionics supplier Rockwell Collins.

Boeing's recovery was progressing, Ortberg told the Financial Times in an interview this month, although he stopped short of saying the company had already turned a corner.

The Air India crash has focused attention on the wide-body 787, Boeing's most advanced model, which is used for long-haul flights. The company has so far delivered more than 1,100 of the aircraft to airline customers.

It marks the first-ever crash since its entry into service in late 2011. Before yesterday's crash it had zero recorded fatalities, according to the Aviation Safety Network's database. Despite its



Wreckage on the ground in Ahmedabad after yesterday's Air India crash, which has focused attention on Boeing's wide-body 787

Siddharaj Solanki/EPA/Shutterstock

good safety record, the 787 has suffered from production setbacks and attention from whistleblowers. Battery fires led air safety regulators to ground the fleet for four months in 2013.

Boeing also had to pause 787 deliveries for almost two years because of quality-control problems. The company last year rejected allegations about the 787's structural integrity from a long-time in-house engineer. Boeing said the issues raised had been rigorously examined and that it had found the aircraft was safe to fly over decades.

Other whistleblowers have raised concerns about Boeing's South Carolina factory where the 787 is assembled. Among them was John Barnett, a former

quality manager at Boeing, who went public with concerns about allegedly poor manufacturing processes in 2019.

Aviation experts yesterday stressed that it was too early to determine the cause of the crash but pointed to some abnormalities, judging from videos of the accident. John Cox, chief executive of Safety Operating Systems, said: "Patience is needed, let the investigators do their work." But the flight profile was "unusual, that is something the investigators will certainly look at".

"The nose of the plane is up and yet it is descending," said Cox, adding that there was also a question about the position of the flaps on the back of the wings. It was difficult to determine whether

The flight profile is 'unusual, that is something investigators will certainly look at'

these were extended or not. "They should have been extended."

Lt Col John R Davidson, a former US Air Force pilot and commercial aviation safety consultant, said the plane appeared to have reached take-off speed but not altitude, according to flight data, suggesting "either a very late rotation or a stall shortly after take-off".

He added: "There are a number of possible scenarios: thrust or engine performance issues, excessive aircraft weight, poor trim or flap configuration, or a more critical failure that affected the aircraft's ability to climb.

"Weather, wind shear or even bird strike can't be ruled out either at this early stage," he said.