

International Commemoration Service, Auditorio de Tenerife, March 27, 2007

Speech by Mr. Camiel Eurlings, Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management of the Netherlands.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Exactly 30 years ago today, there was a collision at Los Rodeos airport, here on Tenerife. It was so terrible that the memory of it silences us even today. 583 people were killed. That is an unimaginable number. 583 people wrenched from their families, their friends and their communities. There are no easy words for that. And there are certainly no words that can take away your pain and loss – you, the people who have lived with the consequences of the disaster for the past 30 years. Grief may fade, but it never disappears. Or as Mr Jan Groenewoud said in a recent interview, “the disaster is still an open wound, in need of care.”

The memorial service that was held in the Netherlands 30 years ago is a permanent part of our collective memory. An aircraft hangar, lined with row upon row of coffins. Speakers groping for the right words, and finding them only with the greatest difficulty. And above all else, the grief and shock on the faces of the victims’ loved ones. Who could ever forget those heartrending images? I myself was only a few years old, but even I have vivid memories of them. And above all, I remember how moved my parents were.

The impressive monument that has now been placed on the Mesa Mota is first and foremost for you, the family and friends of the victims. It is a place to commemorate, share memories and reach out beyond borders to seek comfort from each other. That is its most important purpose. But it is also there as a warning to the aviation world. A warning that safety is our permanent mission. The artist, Ruud van de Wint, calls his creation a symbol of infinity. To me, it is also a symbol of our never-ending duty to make air travel as safe as possible.

Much has changed since the disaster at Los Rodeos. Safety procedures have been tightened up, and so have the technical requirements for aircraft. But they can always be improved. And they must be improved. Because since 23 March 1977, the world has seen many more air disasters. No one in the Netherlands will ever forget 4 October 1992, when an El Al Boeing crashed into a block of flats in Amsterdam. And who will ever forget 11 September 2001, the day the world held its breath, when planes were used as terrorist weapons? Only recently, 21 people lost their lives in Indonesia when a Garuda aircraft crashed. Though these three events are not of the same magnitude, they have one thing in common: the toll they took of innocent human lives. We cannot merely accept loss of life as inevitable. Air safety is not a matter for compromises, and never should be.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am very much aware that with every new disaster old wounds are torn open again. Wounds that – in Mr Groenewoud’s words – need care. That is why we are here today. That is why the Tenerife Memorial had to be built, a place of silence and encouragement.

Today we are remembering the 583 victims. Today, we seek support from each other – each with our own thoughts and personal memories. But I am convinced that coming together to commemorate the dead helps us. Not to forget, because we should never forget, but to cope with our grief. May you find strength to cope with your grief.

Thank you.

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