Case Study Comment 1
by Captain Ed Pooley

Not an unfamiliar situation! A potential for conflict between a late go-around and the departing aircraft or a very late landing clearance, either of which will have the added excitement for all parties of restricted visibility.

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We get a tailwind runway with a lack of positive controlling at both positions. I will concentrate on what I think of the controlling style and leave the question about operating runways right up to the same tailwind component limit as applies to most aircraft types for another day.

Let's look at Approach first. Is there any sign of delivering the usual 'hand off' to Tower? I don't think so. Radar surveillance allows approach controllers to target closer spacing, but if they do that, then positive controlling in required. Speed control for sure. Not accepting an aircraft into the landing sequence until it is at an altitude appropriate to range. Surely this (sometimes) busy international airport has at least one holding stack available? It should be used if necessary to regulate inbound traffic. Pilots always have an option (and these days often an obligation in their SOPs) to decline a clearance which will lead them into an unstabilised approach. Of course they know that if they do so, delay for their landing may follow. If that means their final reserve fuel may be eaten into then increasing numbers of operators now require the declaration of a PAN. And if it becomes obvious that some of it will certainly be used, a MAYDAY. Less prescriptive operators leave equivalent action to the aircraft commander's discretion. Either way, there is no case for the controller not to adjust their normal way of working to a busier situation in order to perform as reliably for Tower as usual.

And then the Tower. I find it surprising that the controller was permitted to issue low-visibility take-off clearance based on automation that doesn't deliver for the whole range of aircraft types which the airport accepts. And once he has been told that the runway is still not clear and knows the next landing aircraft is close in and fast why on earth is the take-off clearance not immediately cancelled and the approaching aircraft told to go around?

But I don't see a problem with individual controllers here, I see an ANSP which is being badly managed by somebody several pay grades removed from the front line. The procedural response to the unexpected has failed because it offered the same relaxed routine that usually works for a situation in which it wasn't going to work. Individuals were left plainly performing outside of their comfort zone and – I surmise without the benefit of proper guidance – probably additional training. Of course, I know the airport loves to get extra landing fees for zero marginal cost – it probably adds to the performance bonus of the top team!

A RECOMMENDATION

A full review should be undertaken of the robustness of ATM procedures to the range of traffic loading which may occur, however infrequently, and of the range of accepted aircraft types which may go with it, preferably by a suitably qualified and independent outsider.