

CRASH OF FLIGHT 965

Crash lawsuits expected to keep Dade courts busy

By CHARLES LUNAN
Business Writer

Expect a lot of the litigation over the American Airlines crash to end up in South Florida courtrooms.

The reasons: The flight originated in Miami and U.S. courts offer the chance of bigger settlements than foreign courts, lawyers in South Florida say.

"There is no question in my mind that this case is going to be

litigated in Dade County," said Kevin Malone, a partner in Krupnick Campbell Malone Roselli Buser Slama Hancock and McNelis of Fort Lauderdale. "The flight originated in Dade County, many of the tickets were issued in Dade County and many of the passengers are from Miami."

Malone was the only Florida lawyer appointed to a committee of lawyers that represented victims of an Avianca crash in New York that killed 73 in 1990. He re-

ceived several calls Thursday from Colombian attorneys with clients who lost relatives in Wednesday's crash.

Avianca and its insurers paid more than \$200 million to settle claims from the crash, Malone estimated.

Fort Lauderdale lawyer Carlos Velasquez just settled his final case from that crash for \$1.75 million.

By the time he arrived at his office Thursday morning, a stack

of messages sat on his desk from the Colombian media.

Reporters for *El Espectador* and the Caracol radio network wanted to know if his Fort Lauderdale firm would be representing Colombians who lost relatives in the latest crash.

"Because we've been involved in so many of these crashes, we've gotten a few calls," said Velasquez, a partner with Montero, Finizio, Velasquez and Weissing. "I do think we will be in-

involved in a substantial number of these cases."

Velasquez and Malone are among a few South Florida lawyers thriving on a disturbing increase in air crashes in Latin America. The firms have carved out a lucrative practice helping Latin American air crash victims and their survivors sue airlines, their owners, suppliers and insurers in the United States, where judges and juries are much more likely to make large awards.

"With foreign carriers, you have a choice of suing the carrier in their country, but if you do, guess what?" said Velasquez. "It will take a long time. The people with the power and the money are the big corporations and airlines, so who do you think will prevail?"

Lawyers accept such cases on a contingency basis. That means they don't get paid until they negotiate a settlement or prevail.

Their reward: 30 percent of any award, plus expenses.