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BUSINESS

Europe Presses for New Air-Travel Safeguards

Civilian Officials Pursue Safety Review With Military, Intelligence Groups



Debris from the crash site of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 is being loaded at the Pelahiivskyi train station ahead of its transportation to Kharkov last month. *TASS/Zuma Press*

By **ANDY PASZTOR** and **ROBERT WALL**

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European air-safety officials are considering novel steps to safeguard airliners from potential military threats in the wake of July's downing of a Malaysia Airlines jet, but some proposals are provoking controversy among other countries.

The safety discussions follow the death of 196 Dutch citizens and 102 victims from other nations in the presumed shootdown of Malaysia Flight 17 by a high-altitude anti-aircraft missile over eastern Ukraine. Propelled by intense public demands for action in the Netherlands, Dutch authorities are pushing to create a first-of-its-kind passenger notification system—intended to explicitly warn travelers about possible dangers of flights over war zones—according to industry and government officials.

Specifics are under debate and the outcome remains unclear. Dutch officials envision that such warnings would be provided to passengers before takeoff, according to these officials. But it remains unclear exactly how or when travelers would receive the notifications.

The initial concept sparked strong opposition from international safety experts concerned about unilateral action by the Netherlands or the European Commission.

At the same time, the European Aviation Safety Agency, the region's premier regulator, is conducting a detailed safety review in conjunction with military and intelligence groups of recent overflights of various countries by Russian military planes. EASA previously steered clear of military matters, but an agency spokesman said European Union defense officials asked it to investigate the matter more closely.

Russia in the past has denied its flights are provocative.

The separate initiatives highlight Europe's continued focus on finding new ways to protect passenger planes from the fallout of hostilities on the ground or military maneuvers in the air.

The issues are expected to come to a head on Tuesday and Wednesday during closed-door meetings in Montreal, when a task force set up by the International Civil Aviation Organization, an arm of the United Nations, debates recommendations for stepped-up warnings to airlines about airspace hazards.

EASA and ICAO, as the U.N. group is known, are seeking extensive security data to provide better guidance to carriers about where it is and isn't safe to fly.

The high-level group advising ICAO favors, among other things, more-coordinated sharing of information about hostile threats to commercial aviation world-wide. Members of the task force, according to people involved in the process, also are



Workers last month loaded debris from Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on to a truck outside Donetsk, Ukraine, for delivery to the Netherlands. *Xinhua/Zuma Press*

seeking a compromise that will satisfy Dutch passenger-rights advocates while avoiding disruptions to current ticketing and routing arrangements.

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Dutch officials didn't respond to requests to comment. Spokesmen for ICAO and the International Air Transport Association, the airline industry's top global trade group, have declined to comment on details of the task force's deliberations.

Based on preliminary recommendations, the ICAO panel is expected to call for more timely and proactive steps to formally alert carriers when airspace is closed due to identification of anti-aircraft missiles or other advanced weapons on the ground. In addition, ICAO already has launched pilot programs to set up centralized clearinghouses of updated information about shifting military threats to airliners.

ICAO's policy-making council won't consider any proposals until February and internal plans indicate some of the changes could take many more months—or even years—to implement. Nonetheless, one ICAO document emphasizes “there is significant room for improvement to reinforce and enhance” civil aviation safety with regard to conflict zones.

Patrick Ky, EASA's executive director, told a hearing of the European Parliament's transportation committee in September his agency was entirely dependent on U.S. intelligence in assessing the safety of airspace in other regions. Since then, however, the downing of Flight 17 and its aftermath have led EASA to start working more closely with European military and intelligence personnel to develop ways to share relevant security information, according to industry and government officials.

“Intelligence services should share information about airspace issues better,” Peter van Dalen, a Dutch member of the European Parliament's transportation committee, said. The information should be circulated among security services and all airlines, he said, expressing frustration that some carriers were avoiding Ukrainian airspace before the Malaysian airliner was shot down while others continued flying there.

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—Peter van Dalen, member of European Parliament's transportation committee

Traditionally, intelligence agencies have opposed widely sharing information, particularly with companies. That remains a potentially major stumbling block for ICAO's plans.

Thomas Windmuller, senior vice president for security at IATA, the airline trade group, said the challenge can be managed through the type of information that is shared. “We don't need to know sources and methods” by which the intelligence was collected, he said. “We need to know what the operational consequences are.”

Where there are doubts about airspace security, flights should be barred, Mr. van Dalen said. Ukraine had closed airspace below where Flight 17 was cruising, though left the airspace above 32,000 feet clear for airlines to traverse. Partial openings make no sense in an era where “there is so much modern equipment that could be in the hands of insurgents,” Mr. van Dalen said.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization last month said flights of Russian bombers

have surged recently and that alliance members conducted more than 100 intercepts of Russian aircraft this year. The Russian planes typically don't file flight plans or use transponders, which makes them difficult for civilian air-traffic controllers to detect.

Michael Fallon, the U.K.'s defense secretary, said in a recent interview that such flights provocative and illegal. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also urged recently "more transparency and predictability" between Russia and the alliance "to avoid that the crisis spirals into something worse."

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