

AVIATIONsecurity

international

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security

www.asi-mag.com

February 2007 : Volume 13 Issue 1



Madrid Airport Bombing:

traditional terrorism
alive and active

Passenger Screening
Threat Mitigation
Checkpoint Doctrine
Technology Integration

Traditional Threats:

from Khartoum to Madrid and from Prague to a flight near you...

by Philip Baum



Whilst we worry ourselves about methodologies for countering the latest modus operandi of al-Qaeda sympathisers, recent events have shown that terrorists, criminals, asylum seekers and mentally disturbed individuals continue to target aviation using traditional techniques.

The activities and atrocities perpetrated by ethnic separatist terrorist organisations rarely have a significant impact on the international media. Generally they do not target aviation, yet there are notable exceptions, including the Irish Republican Army's mortar attacks on London Heathrow in 1994 and, more seriously, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's sabotaging of an Air Lanka jet in 1986 and assault of Bandaranaike airport in 2001.

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, better known internationally at the Basque separatist group ETA, has been targetting Spain's major cities and tourist resorts since 1959. Hundreds have been killed as a result of their activities yet, despite their broad range of tactics that have included kidnapping, drive-by shootings, extortion and city centre bombings, they too have been reluctant to hit the aviation industry with excessive venom. When they have tried, warnings have been telephoned through to the authorities to ensure severe operational disruption with an absence of casualties, although in 1996 ETA left a bomb in Reus airport which injured many tourists. Twice, in 2001, car bombs were left in airport car parks in Malaga and Madrid, and again in Santander in 2003. No injuries.

On 30 December 2006, following an ETA

ceasefire that had held for nine months, a truck bomb exploded in the car park attached to Terminal 4 of Madrid's Barajas airport. Once again telephone warnings were made, in this case three such calls. Details were provided as to the vehicle, its colour, location and registration number. The area was evacuated, but two people were still killed in the subsequent detonation of the device. It is reported that the device contained a charge of in excess of 200kg.

The two that died were Ecuadorian immigrants to Spain; Diego Armando Estacio, 19, and Carlos Alonso Palate, 35. It is believed that they had both fallen asleep in their cars whilst waiting for family members and had not heard the evacuation order. ETA may claim that, as they had given warnings, any deaths were the responsibility of the authorities, yet it was their explosives and their actions that were to blame. Given ETA's proclivity for using car bombs, the Spanish authorities will be looking at ways of better safeguarding airport car parks and, despite the lack of international media coverage afforded the incident, other airport operators around the globe should take note as ETA is not the only group utilising such tactics. On 26 December 2006 in Peshawar Airport, Pakistan, another car bomb exploded killing one person.

The post-Christmas period also presented us with an example of the threat posed by excessive alcohol consumption and the need for aircrew to have the confidence to physically intervene. Whilst alcohol is behind many a disruptive incident, rarely does

excess intoxication result in the individual attempting to enter the flight deck, claiming that, should the aircrew refuse entry, a bomb will destroy the aircraft. But that's exactly what 32-year old Yevgeny Dagayev is alleged to have done on an Aeroflot flight from Moscow to Geneva on 28 December 2006. Granted that this was a Level 4 incident and that Dagayev was ordering the crew to divert to Cairo, one could classify this as an attempted hijacking; it certainly prompted the crew to effect a full restraint and divert to Prague under escort by the Czech Air Force.

Whilst the Aeroflot example is an extreme case, on a daily basis airlines are reporting incidences of disruptive passenger behaviour and the problem is likely to continue to grow as more and more generations of ill-disciplined individuals, who flaunt traditional societal norms and disrespect authority figures (including flight attendants), take to the skies. It is high time that all States take the necessary steps to ensure that perpetrators of violent acts on board commercial aircraft are prosecuted and that no individual escape the arm of the law.

Should an aircraft divert, the State to which that aircraft has diverted to must establish national laws (as a few have done) to ensure that the cause of that flight diversion is brought to account. The fact that the incident itself happened outside its borders must not be a legal loophole for the perpetrator. A long-overdue review of the 1963 Tokyo Convention may help achieve this goal.

Additionally, before we in the "West" allow ourselves to focus all screening efforts on

those from certain ethnic groups most often linked to terrorist acts, we'd be wise to consider how, in terms of discipline, we have a great deal to learn from Asia and the Middle East. Some of the religions and associated values from this region have maintained a disciplined society. For sure, some of the means to ensure such compliance are not always acceptable, but, in general, the core values and traditions that Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and many other religions embrace create an environment where children respect their elders and citizens respect authority.

With this in mind, as we scrutinise those who board our aircraft in our search for troublemakers, perhaps we should be paying specific attention to those most likely to act like infants. It's easy to say that the threat of an English lager lout is nothing in comparison to that of a suicidal terrorist. That's a given. But we're not only looking for terrorists; we're supposed to identify all those who may endanger our aircraft.

And, of course, if that individual just happens to be armed with an AK-47, we'd certainly hope to prevent them boarding a commercial airline. Only that's what Mahamat Abdelatif Mahamat, 24, was initially reported to have been armed with

“...he demanded to go to London, where he wished to claim asylum and attract international attention to the situation in Darfur...”

when he entered the unlocked cockpit of Air West flight 612 operating from the Sudan's capital, Khartoum, to El Fasher, capital of North Darfur, 20 to 30 minutes after takeoff on 24 January 2007. (It should be noted that subsequent reports say he was armed with a pistol and five knives.)

Initially demanding that the flight divert to London, via Rome (possibly due to the presence of an Italian military attaché on board), he eventually accepted the Captain's very genuine claims that there was insufficient fuel and agreed to go to N'Djamena in Chad. Once there he released the 103 passengers and crew and repeated his demanded to go to London, where he wished to claim asylum and attract international

attention to the situation in Darfur. He was arrested by the Chadian authorities.

And just how does one get an AK-47 or, for that matter, a pistol and five knives onto a commercial flight? Time will tell what did happen and, whilst I have visited Khartoum, I am unfamiliar with the domestic screening procedures to know whether they could have been at fault. They could well have been but bribery and corruption also spring to mind as definite options. Security personnel and other airport employees are not exactly well paid and, in Sudan and elsewhere on the African continent, acceptance of monetary offerings can help an individual to provide life's basic necessities. But, let's not be too quick to dismiss bribery and corruption as being merely an African issue; the simultaneous downing of the two Russian airliners departing Moscow Domodedovo in 2004 was effected through bribery and recent reports emerging from airports in Europe, the United States and in Asia have demonstrated the number of criminal gangs that are active in our nation's gateways.

As we enter 2007, we must address the threat posed by the suicidal terrorists armed with their box-cutters and liquid devices, but equally we must face up to the challenges of the past for they too are alive and kicking...

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