

# AVIATION **security** *international*

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## *April the twelfth,* **April the thirteenth**

by Philip Baum

Albeit not generating the media coverage that the high profile attacks of yesteryear managed to achieve, two incidents on two consecutive days in April 1999 should serve as a reminder of the security threat posed to aviation. The first demonstrated that organised terrorist groups can still elect to pursue the hijack option. Whilst, the second could arguably be described as air rage in the extreme. Initially triggered by a lack of information being supplied to the passengers, the incident resulted in mob rule.

### **12 APRIL 1999**

On April 12th, a domestic flight from Bucaramanga to the Colombian capital, Bogota, was hijacked ten minutes after take off. The Avianca twin-engined Fokker 50 turbo prop aircraft carried 41 passengers and five crew.

The hijackers were members of ELN, the Colombian National Liberation Army. The Cuban-inspired group was established in 1964 and attracted radical Catholic priests who wished to put their brand of Christian Marxism into practice. The group has, over the years, specialised in attacks against industry and the kidnapping of industrialists. It is believed that the ELN are now trying to force the government to clear parts of Colombia of government security forces in order to create a safe haven for peace talks. The civil conflict in Colombia, that has spanned four decades, has resulted in the deaths of more than 35,000 people.

The five hijackers were smartly dressed and the last to board the aircraft. The plane was diverted to a remote jungle air strip in

Simiti, where the hijackers, passengers and crew deplaned and the aircraft itself was abandoned, only to be found later by the Colombian army. (Attempts had earlier been made by the authorities to destroy the airstrip, as it was believed to be a base for drug traffickers.) The hostages were herded into canoes and taken up the Magdalena River, then transferred by 4-wheel Jeep to an unknown location deep in the jungle.

Six hostages were actually released close to the landing strip – five elderly passengers and a 3 month old baby who had been travelling with his grandmother. A further three were handed over to the International Red Cross later that week. The remaining hostages included the head of Ecogas, the state owned natural gas company, and a mayor and politician from the ruling Conservative party.

With hostages now being held in captivity for more than a month, the incident could well become one of the most protracted hijackings in the history of attacks against aviation.

### **13 APRIL 1999**

We have also learned of another incident, still under internal investigation (hence the decision not to mention the carriers involved) that took place on April 13th, involving a wet leased aircraft and crew operating a Haj flight from Jeddah to Nigeria.

The B-747 aircraft landed at Kano airport, however many of the passengers were ticketed to Sokoto. The carrier had advised the airline they were operating for that they would not be able to land at Sokoto due to the condition of the Instrument Landing

System and the runway lighting there. The 340 passengers destined for Sokoto were seemingly not advised that the aircraft would be terminating in Kano.

The passengers then refused to leave the aircraft and they even managed to threaten the high loader driver against off-loading the cargo. Although other aircraft were made available to the Sokoto passengers for their onward journey, the passengers remained on board and started to threaten and verbally abuse the crew. The Captain called all the crew to the upper deck and advised against further contact with the 340 passengers on the lower deck who were, by now, physically assaulting any of the ground crew that tried to get on board. One group were shouting "Allah Akbar" and "We Will All Die Together".

The Captain called for the Police, but he was told that there were no police at Kano airport. And, despite it being a military airfield, there was no military response either.

The crew considered escaping down the upper deck slide, but as no real attempt was made by the passengers to move from the lower deck this was deemed unnecessary.

The incident was eventually resolved when a highly respected elder was located amongst the passengers and asked to reason with the core group that was orchestrating the sit-in. He managed to persuade them to de-plane and board one of the aircraft brought in to fly the group to Sokoto.

For those who consider hijacks a thing of the past, and air rage a phenomena only demonstrated by an individual or small group of passengers, just remember the events of April the twelfth and April the thirteenth.