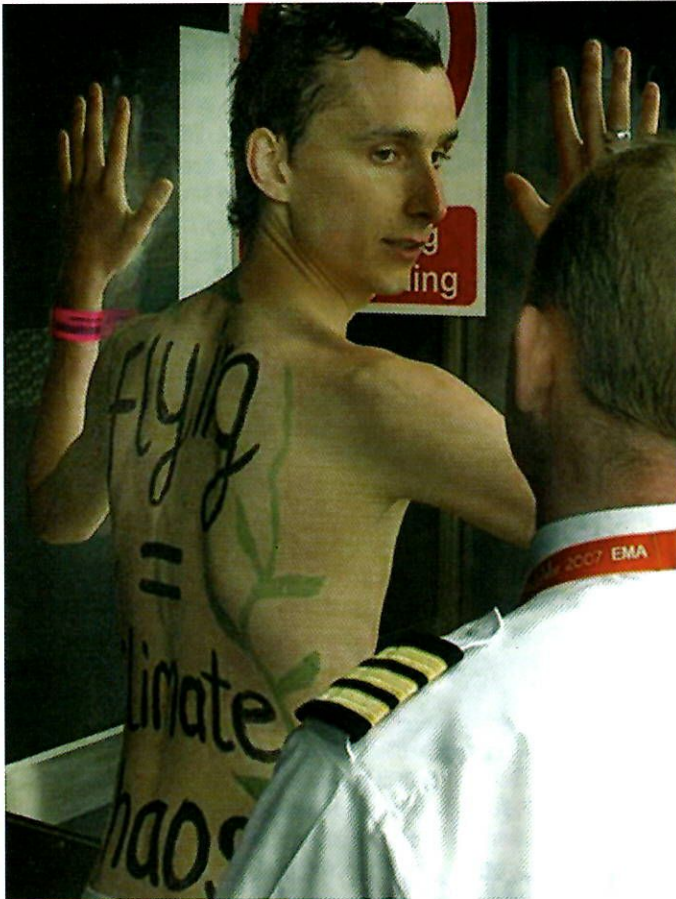


Airport Demonstrations:

when protestors threaten the runways



16 June 2007, East Midlands, UK: men from climate action group Plane Stupid caused disruption by supergluing themselves to the passenger entrances to the airport (Photo: Plane Stupid)

This summer's high profile eight-day environmental Camp for Climate Action at London's Heathrow Airport passed off relatively peacefully. Despite earlier concerns by the police and airport authorities that there would be disruption to operations and that hard-core anarchists, or even al Qaeda-linked militants, might infiltrate the demonstration, it turned out to be a mainly non-violent protest.

BAA, Heathrow's owner, won an injunction in the High Court on 6 August to prevent Plane Stupid – the main group

behind the camp – from demonstrating on airport land or interfering with the airport's operation or staff. Mark Bullock, Managing Director, BAA, Heathrow, said in a statement that day, "We accept that there is an important debate to be had regarding climate change. The motivation behind the injunction was to protect our passengers and staff from being harassed or obstructed by any unlawful direct action."

The demonstration – which was against the expansion of the airport as well as highlighting the environmental effects of a general increase in flights – came hot on the heels of an attempted car bomb attack at

Glasgow airport on 30 June, which led to yet another increase in security at all UK commercial airports. The most pertinent effect was the banning of vehicles from the concourses of the airports. Lawyers for BAA argued that protestors might blockade cars leaving and entering the airport, exposing them to an opportune terrorist attack. Commander Jo Kaye, from the Metropolitan Police, in charge of the police operation at the camp, said that policing the demonstration did not affect the day to day counter-terrorism operation at Heathrow.

A spokesperson for the camp said: "We're not here to disrupt passengers, we're here

*The struggle to prevent further terrorist attacks continues as new intelligence reveals ever more alleged sophisticated plots. It is a struggle that must balance security with practicality and civil liberties. But it is not only extremists, seeking to attack airports and aircraft or to use aircraft as weapons, who pose a security risk. Demonstrators from a variety of causes have hit airports in recent times. **Anna Costin** takes a look at some of these incidents and discusses their wider security implications.*



The August 2007 Camp for Climate Action at London Heathrow brought together protesters who oppose the construction of a 3rd runway (diagram shows likely new flight paths) and other groups concerned about the effect of aviation on global warming and the development of London Heathrow on the surrounding villages. (Credit: HACAN)

to disrupt BAA." Organisers also said that they would not attempt to blockade runways in the interest of public safety.

Perimeter Security

Heathrow has a 13-mile perimeter fence which could have been potentially breached. BAA would not reveal how it secures the fence and runways for obvious security reasons but said that it worked closely with the police both before and during the action in order to ensure the safety of aircraft, terminals, staff and passengers at the airport and said that, from an operations perspective, the strategy used worked extremely effectively. In the past, at times of a heightened threat of terrorism – such as in December 2002 – troops have been brought into patrol the airport and surrounding area, but this was not deemed necessary for the Climate Action week.

As well as a heavy police presence – up to 1,800 officers – at the camp, an increased number of BAA's security staff were deployed at the airport. There were an estimated 1,000 – 2,000 protesters at the camp and by the end of the week, sixty-five people had been arrested, mostly on roads and at businesses around the airport, and there had been only minor scuffles with police.

During the Climate Action week, protesters also targeted private airports in the UK. On 16 August at Biggin Hill in Kent, some protesters chained themselves to the gates of the airport. The same day, at Farnborough Airport in Surrey, a group was stopped after being warned about trespassing. Although nowhere on the same scale as commercial airports in terms of size, flights and

passenger traffic, such private airports made a good target for protestors due to their more penetrable security – both landside and airside – although such demonstrations had much less media impact.

The camp was by no means the first demonstration at an airport – in the UK or globally. What marked out the Camp for Climate Action for such high profile media coverage was firstly that it was at London Heathrow, the world's busiest airport in terms of international passenger traffic, secondly because BAA had won a controversial injunction limiting the protest, and thirdly given that the cause of the protest was global warming – an issue increasingly at the top of the global political and news agenda.

Other British Protests

During the late 1990s there were long-running protests against expansion at Manchester airport. These protests caused civil unrest, but the 'eco-warriors' involved set up camp in fields well away from the airport, and never intended to target the airport itself as the focus of their demonstration was the environment surrounding the site that was under threat. The same is true of the No Border camp protest at Gatwick Airport, scheduled for the last week of September 2007. Expected to be on a much smaller scale than its Climate Action counterpart, and with the converse aim of encouraging more travel and migration, in an ideal world free of immigration controls, the week-long camp will take place in a field miles from the airport.

The Heathrow demonstration contrasts sharply with action at Ireland's Shannon

Airport in 2002 and 2003. In October 2002, anti-Iraq war protestors marched on Shannon, where US troops were transiting en-route to Iraq and Afghanistan, and tore down a 50 metre section of the perimeter fence, resulting in up to 150 people entering the airfield, despite the presence of hundreds of police officers. Protesters were unable to gain access to the terminal buildings but did bring traffic to a halt by blocking the airport road – something BAA sought to avoid at Heathrow. In January 2003 an Irish anti-war activist attacked a US Navy jet with an axe and the following month a group of Catholic Worker activists damaged another US Navy aircraft at the airport. All of those charged over incursions at Shannon were later acquitted in court.

More peaceful protests against allegations of the US military using UK airports for the so-called 'war on terror' and 'extraordinary rendition' flights, occurred on 24 June 2006 when small numbers of protestors – some wearing Guantanamo Bay style orange jumpsuits – demonstrated outside Glasgow, Prestwick, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Gatwick airports.

During August 2006, protestors against the US' military support for Israel in its war with Hizbullah in Lebanon that summer, broke into Prestwick Airport, Scotland, through its perimeter fence, over a series of nights and managed to board US military aircraft. Once on board they were able to examine documentation and manuals. Airport officials claimed the group had been spotted before they reached the aircraft but that security officials were advised by police not to approach them until police officers



On 9th September 2007, Thai riot police officers take up positions outside the Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

International Protests

On a smaller scale, in April 2007, a home owner fed up with aircraft noise from neighbouring Boulder Airport in the US state of Colorado, mounted a one-man protest and risked his life and that of others by jumping over a border fence and running onto the runway, preventing an aircraft from landing and obstructing the path of a helicopter.

Also that month, activists from the Climax environmental group in Sweden broke into Bromma Airport in Stockholm, occupying the runway and disrupting flights for around 30 minutes. The ten activists – linked by chains and carrying a huge banner which read 'stop domestic flights' – were able to gain entry to the airport and runway without being intercepted. Police arrived at the scene of the protest after five minutes but refrained from violent intervention. After the protest ended, the activists were charged with aggravated trespass.

Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi Airport has not been without its problems since opening in September 2006. In September 2007, local residents affected by noise pollution threatened to release a large number of balloons near the airport to disrupt air traffic, but have delayed the action indefinitely after talks with Airports of Thailand, to see if their complaints can be resolved without recourse to such action.

arrived. A spokesperson for the airport said they were satisfied that their security measures were working effectively and that, "aviation security is a multi-layered approach." At the time of the incident, the press pointed out that several of the protestors were women over the age of 65, and that if they could trespass airside so easily, onto military planes, what did that say for the chances of a young man trained in a terrorist-run military camp, with more malevolent aims, being able to do the same?

In September 2006, activists from Plane Stupid broke through a security gate at the UK's East Midlands Airport, and had a Baptist minister hold a service of remembrance for those who had died as a result of climate change, delaying flights but not accessing aircraft. Plane Stupid returned to the airport in June of this year when two of its members superglued themselves to the entrance of the terminal – a lot less of a security risk than the previous incident.

Convictions & Fallout

In the UK, airport demonstrators who have trespassed airside, damaged aircraft or property or caused civil unrest have often been charged with a range of offences from trespassing to criminal damage. Like

Examples of other recent action at airports around the world

Date	Location	Incident
5 June 2007	Anjouan, Comoros	Police shot and wounded three civilians at Ouani airport during airfield protests. The presidential flight was diverted as a result of this incident.
18 June 2007	Agadez, Niger	The Niger Movement for Justice opened fire on the airport in action against the government.
17 July 2007	El Arish, Egypt	Around 100 Palestinian nationals smashed doors and windows inside the airport building after being held there for more than a month following the closure of Egypt's border with Gaza. They were returning to the Gaza Strip from abroad and did not have entry visas for Egypt.
24 July 2007	Fortaleza, Brazil	15 passengers forced their way onto a Gol aircraft after having spent the night at the terminal waiting for a flight to Brasilia.
22 August 2007	Sultan Kahirun Babullah Airport, Indonesia	The airport was closed for one day after a nearby election protest turned violent, with thousands of protestors attacking buildings and blocking roads.

the activists at Shannon Airport, however, many have been acquitted in court or received non-custodial sentences or fines, often due to having no previous criminal convictions, so the law has not been an effective deterrent for others against this form of direct action.

Despite the high number of – but often underreported – anti-aviation demonstrations around the world there has, to date, been no loss of life or significant disruption through non-terrorist or insurgent airport and aircraft incursions. So did BAA overreact to the Camp for Climate Change? And was the injunction really about not damaging the UK's competitiveness at a time when its major airport is already at full capacity? BAA said in a statement that Europe's other major airports are building more capacity to attract the passengers who are currently flying through Heathrow and that if expansion prevents airlines from flying through the airport they will fly from an alternative hub: "That does nothing to combat climate change but would severely damage the UK's competitiveness."

However, one of the biggest fears of

security officials is that terrorist groups will gain greater insight into an airport's vulnerabilities every time a protestor carries out a successful incursion or even manages significant landside disruption. An even bigger concern is that militants could infiltrate airport demonstrations, bringing with them explosives and weapons, primed for suicide attacks and able to target large gatherings of people in a relatively confined space. BAA said that around 1.5 million passengers travelled through Heathrow the week of the Climate Action camp – which averages at around 200,000 every day – at the height of the summer holidays, when many families were travelling. Although, according to its website, the Camp for Climate Action has no future mass demonstration planned as yet, it does intend to organise future direct action.

As airports around the world continue to expand in order to increase their capacity, and both scheduled and budget airlines take on new routes to offer more low-cost travel to millions of people, there will undoubtedly be more airport protests. And nobody can predict

what political events in the future will give rise to direct action such as that seen at Shannon and Prestwick airports. Not every demonstration would necessarily be as relatively trouble free as those seen so far. If hard-core anarchists, set on violent protest for the sake of violence and mayhem alone, were able to run riot at an airport, millions of pounds worth of damage and major disruption could be caused in one day. And if an attack by terrorists infiltrating an airport demonstration were to occur in a Western country that values human rights and civil liberties, it would be interesting to see how a Western, democratic government would balance the right to free expression and peaceful demonstration with the need for preventative security measures when the country faced a critical or severe threat status.

The author is a freelance journalist. She has three years' experience as Jane's Information Group's Terrorism Journalist and was co-editor of Islamic Affairs Analyst.



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