

UK terror scare: Airlines threaten legal action against British government

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A bitter row has broken out between the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and companies operating airports and airlines in the UK, following the officially driven hysteria over the alleged plot to blow up aircraft en route from Britain to the US.

Facing multimillion-pound losses caused by thousands of cancelled flights, tens of thousands of inconvenienced passengers, and increased levels of highly intrusive security measures, a number of airlines have openly attacked the government's anti-terror measures and are investigating compensation claims.

Tensions have risen as it has become increasingly clear the measures imposed were motivated more by the political exigencies of the British and American administrations than by any real and immediate terror threat.

No evidence has been presented to back up claims that a major terrorist threat was only narrowly averted on August 10. It is questionable as to whether any terror plot existed in the first place, given that none of those held without charge had even purchased air tickets and no bombs had been assembled.

Yet, in the early hours of August 10, British airport operators were told by the government to impose an unprecedented security regime, supposedly aimed at thwarting the alleged suicide-bombing plot.

Without prior warning, passengers were informed that only travel documents, sun glasses and urgent medications would be allowed on board as cabin luggage. All other luggage had to be checked in, and all liquids, except baby milk, were banned, as were magazines and books, and every passenger was subject to be searched.

Despite claims that the police had been investigating the alleged plotters for up to one year, none of the airports or airlines had even been informed that a potential threat existed. The instruction to impose new security measures was so unexpected that airports and airlines did not have the staff available to effectively implement the new measures.

Airports were brought to a virtual standstill as check-in, luggage handling, and security staff and systems were

overwhelmed. The UK's airports handle more than 217 million people annually, 67 million of whom go through Heathrow Airport—the world's busiest international airport.

Even when hundreds of staff were called in to deal with the emergency, tens of thousands of travellers were forced to queue for many hours simply to pass security, only to be told repeatedly that their flights were delayed or cancelled altogether.

On August 10 itself, British Airways (BA) cancelled all short-haul flights, and Easyjet cancelled all flights from London's three airports, citing airport congestion. Ryanair cancelled around 50 flights.

The security measures immediately backed up traffic around the world. Lufthansa cancelled or diverted 28 Heathrow-bound flights. Air France, Iberia and Alitalia made similar cancellations, while all UK-bound flights from the Netherlands were cancelled. Many other airlines were forced to take similar measures.

The British Airport Authority (BAA), the privatised operator of two thirds of British airports, imposed a 20 percent flight reduction on all carriers to reduce congestion. By August 16, nearly a week after the new measures had been introduced, BA had cancelled more than 1,100 flights, and other major UK operators were only just returning to a schedule free of forced cancellations, while a reduced volume of passengers faced much-increased delays and inconvenience.

Even though the government and police claim they have arrested the "main players" involved in the alleged plot, the security measures have remained in force and there are suggestions they could be made permanent. Eight days after the initial arrests, the Department of Transport said there would be no rapid reductions in security, whilst one source briefed the media that "the way we travel will never be the same again."

Estimates of the losses faced by the airlines vary. BA is reported to have lost £30 million on August 10, thereafter £5 million per day. Some reports suggest that in total, airlines will have lost up to £250 million.

The cut-price airlines have been especially hard hit. Easyjet's estimated £10 million losses will reduce its profit figures by between 5 and 10 percent, while Ryanair faces a 5 percent cut in profits.

A spokesman for Heathrow Airport told the *Sunday Herald*, "The longer it goes on the harder it becomes for people. Unless the passengers are treated more reasonably we will not have an industry left."

Initially, the airlines turned on the BAA, recently purchased by the Spanish group Ferrovial. BA, Virgin Atlantic, Easyjet and BMI British Midland all supported calls for £250 million compensation from the airport operator. The BAA's Heathrow CEO, Tony Douglas, and his BA counterpart, Willie Walsh, had a public confrontation at Heathrow over the airport authorities' threat to ban all flights from airlines that did not follow cancellation orders.

Walsh had previously complained, "BAA had no plan ready to keep Heathrow functioning properly." He added, "The queues for security have wound all round the terminals like a bad dream at Disneyland..."

But in recent days, the airlines, led by Ryanair's Michael O'Leary, have begun targeting the Blair government.

Ryanair is one of the world's most profitable airlines, having risen to become Europe's largest short-haul airline on the basis of fast turnaround times, cheap web bookings, standardised aircraft, low pay for cabin crews, and flights to out-of-town air strips.

O'Leary is just the kind of successful "entrepreneur" that the government has been keen to court in recent years. In 2005, Ryanair was criticised for negotiating salary increases only with non-union staff in what a spokesman for the European Transport Workers' Federation said was tantamount to "blackmail" against unionised workers.

At a press conference last week, O'Leary posed beside an actor dressed as Winston Churchill, under the slogan "Keep Britain flying." He demanded that security be reduced to the usual levels set down by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) within seven days, or the airline would take legal action against the government. He complained, "We are now body searching five- and six-year olds flying to Spain for a vacation with their parents. We're not adding to security, we're adding to public hysteria."

Describing the security measures as "insane and ineffective," he ridiculed the idea that Britain was at risk from "lethal toiletries," and queried why, if the terror threat was so grave, similar measures were not being imposed on the London subway and bus network, which has previously been targeted for attack.

In a later statement, he queried whether there had, in fact, been a plot to bomb aircraft. "We may not have seen any attempt to blow aircraft out of the sky," he said. "Where is

the evidence?"

Ryanair, along with Easyjet and BA, are considering legal action under the terms of the British 2000 Transport Act. Traditionally, airlines and airports have borne any costs associated with increased security, but the 2000 Transport Act, Section 93, leaves open the possibility of operators being compensated for increased security measures. The airlines are hoping that the threat of a lawsuit will either force the government to abandon its clampdown or compensate the airlines for the costs of imposing it.

The airlines' complaints have caused a breach in the media's otherwise unquestioning acceptance of the alleged terror plot and accompanying security measures.

Reflecting widespread and growing public scepticism as to the government's claims, airport workers have been quoted on the idiocy and oppressive character of the new rules.

One pilot, for example, explained that he had been barred from taking his spectacle case onto a flight deck, but noted that there was a fire axe already on board. "While my glasses were deemed potentially deadly dangerous items, I once again took my seat at the controls of 185,000 kilos of aeroplane, people and fuel and managed to restrain myself from taking the crash axe to all and sundry prior to rolling, inverted and diving, into the Channel," he said.

Other pilots told how they had been barred from taking their contact lens fluid onto flight decks, despite the potential impact this could have on their vision.

In a move designed to placate the airlines and silence further criticism, Alistair Darling, trade and industry secretary, said security restrictions would be made more "manageable" in the coming days.



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