PANIC TRUMPS PROTOCOL IN BRITISH AIRWAYS FIRE IN LAS VEGAS

News / Airlines, Airports / Routes

Among the images to emerge from the September 8 fire that severely damaged a British Airways Boeing 777-200ER at Las Vegas's McCarran International Airport was one of evacuated passengers walking away from the blazing aircraft, toting their carry-on luggage. And not just handbags or briefcases; several men could be seen wheeling away full-sized carry-on cases.

The problems involved in trying to retrieve and carry baggage in an emergency are obvious. Apart from the delays involved in getting luggage out of overhead lockers, then trying to carry or wheel them down aisles full of jostling, panicking passengers, any sharp edges on baggage risk puncturing escape slides, rendering them useless and putting other passengers at risk.

"Pilots want to work with airlines and regulators to ensure passengers are fully aware of the danger of bringing hand luggage with them during an evacuation," said Captain Brendan O'Neal, chairman of the British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA). "In a serious emergency such as a fire all passengers and crew need to get off the aircraft as quickly as possible and the target is to evacuate in 90 seconds. Failing to follow the instructions of the crew by stopping to collect luggage is extremely dangerous as it slows down the evacuation, could block aisles and prevent passengers getting off in time and could cause injuries."

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But there seems little chance of either persuading or compelling passengers to leave their luggage behind, even if ordered to do so, say several commentators and official bodies.
“All passengers have to follow the instructions of the commander of the aircraft,” a UK Civil Aviation Authority spokesman told Airways News. “Passenger responsibility is to obey any commands or requests.” But he was hesitant as to whether a passenger who delayed an evacuation would face criminal charges later.

A British Airways spokeswoman was similarly cautious on the issue: “Hypothetically, and separately from this [Las Vegas] case, I think there’s a legal obligation for passengers to obey instructions.” But beyond that, “I don’t think we would want to comment.”

Failure to comply with cabin crew’s instructions in many countries is classed as illegal and passengers disobeying those instructions can theoretically be charged with an offense. However, airlines are likely to be reluctant to press charges against customers who have escaped from a frightening and potentially life-threatening situation, such as an aircraft fire.
“I would imagine it would be very difficult to say if someone has willfully [disobeyed an instruction] in an emergency situation,” said one official who asked not to be identified. “People react very differently in an emergency. If it went to court, their lawyers could argue whether they had heard everything that was said in the panic.”

One of the most difficult problems is overturning human nature in extremely stressful situations such as an emergency evacuation.

“One of the things you get in an emergency is a panic reaction,” said Professor Graham Braithwaite of Cranfield University in the UK. One of Cranfield’s areas of expertise is aviation, including its safety aspects. Braithwaite is professor of safety and accident investigation at the establishment.

In an emergency, people retraced their behaviors that they had displayed when they entered the aircraft, he said. “People sometimes run to the door that they came in on, rather than the nearest exit. Similarly, when you get off an aircraft [in normal circumstances] you take your luggage with you.” So passengers automatically tried to retrieve it.

“More selfishly,” he added, “there are some who don’t want the hassle of being separated from their luggage, because they know they probably won’t get back on board again [after the incident].”

Cabin crew could try ordering someone who appeared at the emergency exit chute to leave luggage behind. However, “The dilemma for cabin crew members is that they need to keep the flow rate going. They are supposed to get all passengers off within 90 seconds through just 50% of the exits. If some of that assembled throng turn up with luggage, they don’t really have anywhere to put it.” Leaving it behind near the top of the evacuation slide could make the luggage another hazard.”

Faced with the choice of arguing with a passenger carrying luggage or getting them out of the door, the latter option was likely to win.

In theory, said Braithwaite, passengers could be charged with endangering the aircraft. “But I guess in an evacuation, to a degree, all bets are off. I think a lot of it comes down to pre-flight briefing. That’s the opportunity to tell people what is and isn’t acceptable. But you have to accept that quite a lot of people don’t take [the briefing] on board.”

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