RUSSIAN PLANE CRASH HIGHLIGHTS FEARS OF FLYING NEAR CONFLICT ZONES

News / Airlines

The crash of a Russian jetliner in the Sinai Peninsula once again raises concerns about planes flying near combat zones, which have been a growing worry for aviation regulators.

U.S. aviation officials earlier this year warned airlines and pilots not to traverse the area of the Sinai Peninsula below 26,000 feet out of concerns that ground fire could put planes at risk. The U.K. and Germany also in recent weeks submitted alerts regarding flights through the area because of concerns about antiaircraft weapons. Egypt has been battling Islamic militants in recent years. The insurgents last year downed an Egyptian military helicopter with a surface-to-air missile.

The Airbus A321, operated by Russian carrier Kogalymavia and flying to St. Petersburg, Russia, from Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, appears to have reached an altitude of 33,000 feet before losing altitude, according to plane-tracking website flightradar24.com. That would put it out of reach of most widely available, crude antiaircraft weapons.

Sinai Province, a branch of Islamic State, said it shot down the plane, according to the SITE

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Intelligence Group, which monitors global extremist activity, though Sinai Province's claims couldn't independently be verified. The group in the past has made exaggerated claims.

Based on the information they have thus far, U.S. officials believe the plane was likely brought down by mechanical issues, rather than by an act of terrorism. But officials said the intelligence was still being reviewed and the assessment could change.

In a sign of how sensitive airlines have become about operating near conflict zones, Air France-KLM, Europe's largest airline by traffic, and Deutsche Lufthansa AG on Saturday said they had decided to temporarily suspend overflying Sinai until more is known about the cause of the Russian jetliner's crash. Dubai-based airline Emirates, the world's largest by international traffic, also said it was currently avoiding Sinai Peninsula overflights until more information becomes available.

Rerouting planes can add flight time and increase fuel consumption. It can also cause an operational headache for air traffic control if more flights are squeezed into limited airspace. The Middle East is already contending with several flight restrictions, including over Iraq, leading many airlines to shift routes to Iranian airspace.

Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed last year over eastern Ukraine by a sophisticated Russian-made Buk antiaircraft missile, which is more capable than the type of antiaircraft missiles believed to be available to Islamist groups operating in Sinai.

Culpability for the downing of the jetliner over Ukraine, which was also flying at 33,000 feet when it was hit, is still being established. Ukraine and Western countries blame pro-Russian separatists fighting government forces in the region - a charge Moscow denies. All 298 people on board the flight to Kuala Lumpur from Amsterdam died.

The incident this year prompted the International Civil Aviation Organization, the United Nations's air-safety arm, to establish a central information clearing house to alert airlines about possible threats to flights.

The latest entry to the ICAO system regarding the American, British and German concerns about Sinai overflights was made Oct. 5.

Stephen Creamer, director of ICAO's Air Navigation Bureau, told an aviation-security conference in Dublin on Monday that "we know we need to refine the capabilities of the repository."

Tony Tyler, director general of the International Air Transport Association, which represents more than 200 carriers, this week said the sharing of useful information needs to be done "a bit faster."

In addition to the plane which crashed in Sinai, Kogalymavia operates four other A321 passenger aircraft, according to a July news release.

The A321 is the largest version of Airbus's single-aisle family of jetliners. It typically seats around 189 passengers, though can accommodate up to 220 in a high-density configuration. The Toulouse, France-based company recently gained approval to pack as many as 240 passengers from 2018.

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Airbus narrowbodies have been involved in several recent high-profile crashes, including that of a Germanwings flight in March, apparently at the hands of a suicidal pilot killing all 150 people onboard. Late last year, an AirAsia Indonesia plane carrying 162 people crashed into the Java Sea. The crash report is pending.

Still, the Airbus single-aisle jet family, which, along with the Boeing Co. 737 represents the backbone of global commercial airline operations, has a good safety record, with a rate of 0.10 fatal crashes per one million flights - better than many other airplane models.

The last fatal A321 accident occurred in July 2010, when a Pakistani Airblue Ltd. plane crashed killing all 152 people on board, according to the Flight Safety Foundation's Aviation Safety Network. The accident was linked to pilot mistakes, cockpit confusion and a disregard for safety procedures.

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