UK PILOTS WARN ON BATTERIES AND FATIGUE

News / Airlines

The British Airline Pilots' Association (BALPA) has issued warnings to both passengers and carriers over potential risks to safety. The UK pilots' union urged passengers to show caution when packing battery-powered gadgets and cautioned airlines to ensure their flight deck personnel received adequate rest between duty stints.

BALPA told passengers flying off on the last major UK public holiday before Christmas to ensure that any devices powered by lithium batteries were packed in cabin baggage, rather than checked into the hold, to enable easy access to them if they caught fire.

Lithium batteries have been responsible for three major onboard incidents, including the fatal crashes of two Boeing 747 freighters after thermal runaway in batteries being carried as cargo—not in passengers' baggage—ignited and caused an uncontrollable fire. BALPA points out that ICAO has already banned lithium metal batteries from being carried as cargo, given their ability to combust and create a fire that is difficult to extinguish.

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“Lithium batteries are essential parts of the gadgets that enable people to travel light and stay connected, but flight safety comes first and we must protect against any aircraft fire risk,” BALPA flight safety specialist Steve Landells said.

The union said the safest way to prevent problems is for passengers to ensure that any lithium battery devices are carried in hand luggage and suggested check-in staff ask if they are carrying any devices that may be powered by such batteries.

Earlier this year, the European Aviation safety Agency (EASA) issued safety bulletins on fighting lithium battery fires onboard aircraft and also warned of dangers of packing increasingly popular electronic cigarettes in checked-in baggage.

Meanwhile, BALPA cautioned employers that incidents of fatigue are being under-reported. “We want to destigmatize the issue and remove the barriers that discourage pilots from sharing their experience,” head of flight safety Rob Hunter said.

“BALPA is currently carrying out a project to investigate reporting culture within commercial aviation and give an accurate picture of the extent of fatigue within the industry. Pilots want industry-wide open discussions about fatigue. They would like reassurance that their managers also see reporting of fatigue as a priority.”

The union added it had been told by members this was the busiest summer in living memory and they believed managements had not recruited sufficient pilots to mitigate the fatigue problem. The union intends to sit down with airlines after the holiday season to find out what had gone wrong.

02 SEPTEMBER 2015

SOURCE: ATW
ARTICLE LINK:
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