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Does the E.U.'s Airline Blacklist Make Flying Safer?

By Bruce Crumley / Paris

On the surface, the news that Yemenia Airways, whose jet crashed off the coast of the Comoros Islands on Tuesday, was not on the European Union's blacklist of airlines deemed lax on safety seems like a good argument for not only maintaining the blacklist, but extending it further.

Some families of the 152 victims, 66 of them French nationals, claim their relatives died as a result of sub-standard practices the airline uses once it's beyond the view of European inspectors (Efforts to contact Yemenia officials for comment this week were unsuccessful). The modern Airbus A330 that Yemenia flies from Paris to Sanaa in Yemen, they charge, was systematically swapped for an aging A310 for the final leg to Comoros' capital Moroni. Meanwhile, Transport Minister Dominique Bussereau pointed out that the A310 that crashed Tuesday had been banned in France since 2007 after failing security checks. And with the E.U. set to review its blacklist this month, Bussereau suggested, Yemenia's operational days in Europe may be numbered. ([See pictures of the hunt for the Air France plane.](#))

The problem with all that is, it only tells half the story. "Yemenia actually has a modern fleet and enviable safety record, with this being its first loss of life in 36 years," says Ronan Hubert, aviation accident expert and president of the Geneva-based Aircraft Crashes Record Office. "I can't say whether the claims by Comorans of appalling service aboard are valid or not, but service isn't the same as safety, and on that point Yemenia's record speaks for itself."

But the airline's near-sparkling safety record is of little comfort to France's enraged Comoran community of 250,000. Following the crash, their protests of what they call Yemenia's reckless practices disrupted the airline's flights from Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport and forced it to discontinue its flights from Marseille. "This accident was inevitable, because these planes don't respect international standards," says Farid Soilihi, president of the Marseille-based SOS Voyages To Comoros association, which was formed in 2008 to protest Yemenia's service. "Yemenia's quasi-monopoly [allows it] to treat us like we're animals." ([Read: "What the Comoros Invasion Reveals."](#))

But a check with other airlines shows that Air France, British Airways, Air Kenya and others offer similar service to Moroni, albeit with stopovers in Africa, rather than Yemen — some even at lower prices. When questioned about this, SOS Voyages to Comoros argued that seats on other airlines are often fully booked, leaving travelers no choice but to fly Yemenia. "People only fly Yemenia if they can't get on the others," explains Mustapha Abdou-

Raouf, the association's Paris representative. "Those who died had to fly Yemenia if they wanted to get to the Comoros this summer."

Potentially more damning, though, is Yemenia's habit of flying newer A330s from Paris to Sanaa and then swapping them for older A310s to fly people continuing on to the impoverished Comoros. Surely that suggests better treatment for its richer clients than those from developing nations, right?

Not really, experts say. "There's nothing unusual about Yemenia or any other airline adapting aircraft to both passenger loads and routes being flown," says Paul Hayes, director of the London-based Ascend airline consultancy, adding that swapping planes is a common way for airlines to maximize fuel and cost efficiency. "And while much has been made about the crashed A310 having been banned in France since 2007, you hear no one pointing out that the same A310 has since then been regularly flown between Sanaa and London, where it has passed safety inspections by the British Civil Aviation Association." ([Read: A brief history of Black Boxes.](#))

Even the notion of a fleet being maintained with an eye to going cheap on planes used for "poor" routes makes little sense, other experts say. "If you've established maintenance and safety operations for your fleet, it's going to be applied uniformly throughout," says Anthony Council, spokesman for the Geneva-based International Air Transport Association. "The reason, as we've seen in this case, is simple: should any of your planes have a serious incident, your entire operation falls under suspicion." ([Read: "How to Survive a Plane Crash."](#))


Ascend's Hayes also points out that external factors may have played into the A310's crash — including a night landing on a poorly-lit strip, and high winds that reportedly caused an aborted landing prior to the accident. Despite that, Bussereau again warned on Friday that "Yemenia has to make big efforts" on safety if it wants to avoid being placed on the E.U.'s blacklist this month. ([See pictures of the miracle on the Hudson.](#))

But even if it is, as Tuesday's accident shows, an E.U. ban wouldn't prevent European travelers from flying Yemenia and other small airlines on routes between Sanaa and destinations outside Europe when they are the cheapest or only options. And with the doomed A310 having continued flying between Yemen and London with the approval of British safety officials even after the French ban, blacklisting individual airlines may not be an effective or fair approach.

"What Europe should do is follow the U.S. method of banning all airlines from countries whose civil aviation officials don't enforce international security standards," Hubert argues. "Targeting individual carriers is often overly subjective, and inefficient in remedying the original problem of insufficient oversight by national aviation authorities." The E.U. blacklist already effectively bans all airlines from nations such as Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Croatia and Paraguay, in addition to individual carriers from countries whose safety oversights the E.U. considers sound. Even that, though, can't prevent disaster from striking some of the largest and most reputable airlines on earth, whose accidents often account for the industry's highest death tolls.

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