Eighteen dead after Pan Am hijack

KARACHI

Last Friday's hijacking of a Boeing 747 proves that international airlines are still vulnerable to terrorist action, in spite of their increased wariness, and raises a number of questions about techniques for dealing with hijackings.

Pan Am 073 landed at Karachi at 0455hr on Thursday morning, due to depart an hour later for Frankfurt. Four gunmen stormed the 747, held the aircraft for 17hr and, when the power unit and lights failed, panicked, killing 18 passengers and injuring up to 100 others. The hijackers penetrated airport security "wearing uniforms that appeared to be those worn by Karachi Airport security forces", Pan Am says. They were driving "a security police van or a van designed to resemble a security police van".

As passengers were boarding, the terrorists stormed the aircraft. The pilot and copilot escaped through a hatch in the cockpit and down a rope. Much criticism has been levelled at them for leaving the passengers and aircrew leaderless, but their action was intended to immobilise the aircraft, not to save their own skins. Pan Am will not say if the crew had been instructed to abandon the aircraft in such a situation.

When the hijackers asked for an Arabic-speaking crew, the security forces were given another bargaining point. The aircraft was grounded for 17hr while a crew was brought from Frankfurt, rather than be allowed to fly to Cyprus with nervous hijackers, automatic weapons, and hand grenades on board.

Earlier this week the hijackers had been identified as members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), but had not been narrowed down to any particular faction. (Pakistan is one of the countries which recognises the PLO.) They demanded to be flown on to Cyprus to secure the release of unspecified people in Cypriot prisons. Negotiations went on with Pan Am and local Government officials until the aircraft lights went out. This threw the terrorists into a panic and prompted their indiscriminate firing inside the aircraft.

Pakistani security forces arrived some 4-5min later, according to their London High Commission. Reports of a 15min delay are said to be inaccurate. If this had been the case, many more passengers would have been killed.

Allowing the power unit to fail, presumably because it ran out of fuel, was a mistake, according to Dennis Phipps, former British Airways head of security and ex-chairman of Iata's security committee. The authorities should have all available technical advice in such a case, he says. If they had known that the power was about to go, it would have given them another bargaining lever.

The Karachi incident also raises the question of airport staff screening. Phipps comments. Police and customs officials are not subject to the same degree of checks as other airport staff when moving from landside to airside.

Ideally, perimeter guards should check everything coming and going. Without constant delays, it is almost impossible to search every catering van passing in and out or to check the passes of all people in a security vehicle. Electronic screening equipment to back up the guard will in future go some way towards tightening security.

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GE prepares for further UDF tests

EVENDALE

“It makes a very pleasant, unobjectionable noise—like a nice room fan,” says General Electric’s senior vice-president for the company’s aircraft engine group, Brian Rowe, talking about the UDF (unducted fan) flight test. “FUEL consumption is what we expected it to be,” he adds.

The most fundamental development work to be continued in the 70hr proof-of-concept-engine flight-test programme, and then beyond with modified powerplants, is in the very-high-pressure-ratio “modern gas generator”, which Rowe says is the secret of the UDF—the thing the competition has to equal.

Efficiency and noise-level improvements are to continue with a number of measures, notable among them the intention to have one more blade in the front propulsor than in the rear, and to make the second propulsor diameter sufficiently smaller than that of the first to ensure that the blade tip vortices do not interfere.

Brian Rowe’s favourite way of expressing what the UDF is ultimately expected to achieve is to explain that while a current narrowbody airliner can use up to 1.7lb of fuel to carry 1lb of payload 1,700 n.m., the UDF should perform the same feat using only 0.4ib of fuel. Boeing says of its planned 747-400 powered by 747s that it should better its nearest competitor by 8 to 10 per cent in total lower operating costs.

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Cathay disappoints stockmarket

HONG KONG

Cathay Pacific marked its first six months as a publicly quoted company with a massive jump in profit. The Hong Kong passenger and cargo airline reports HK$302 million profits in the six months to June 30, 1986, a 69 per cent leap on the corresponding period last year, when it was a privately held unit of Swire Pacific. Revenues were up 17 per cent to HK$4,200 million.

Despite the healthy improvement, the result disappoints analysts, who had forecast anything up to HK$650 million profit. Cathay stock slumped 20 cents on the news to HK$55.50 and subsequently fell to HK$55.35, which is still well above the offer price of HK$3.88. Less than 15 per cent of the carrier was spun off earlier this year in what became Hong Kong’s largest stockmarket float, oversubscribed some 56 times.

Cathay Pacific says that the second half should continue to be profitable, but sounds a note of caution over fuel prices. “The bottom of this particular market cycle may have been reached, and there could be some upturn following the latest Opec agreement on production,” says chairman Michael Miles.