

How Safe Are International Airlines?

It's Hard to Tell Without a Standardized Ratings; No Consensus on Kazakhstan



By SCOTT MCCARTNEY

You can check fares, fees and flight schedules for just about any airline in the world with a few keystrokes or a single phone call. But checking the safety of an international airline is a much more complicated task.

European and U.S. regulators evaluate aviation safety, and the airline industry itself has a world-wide safety-audit program, but it's difficult for travelers to check airline safety when buying tickets. There's no restaurant-inspector's score posted on the airplane door or government crash-test star rating printed on your ticket.

That's unfortunate, since interest in airline safety is high. It's been a bad year for aviation fatalities, with more than 700 people killed in 16 crashes around the world so far in 2009. Many involved little-known airlines—some already on watch lists for safety concerns.

"There's no perfect solution at the moment, but it's undoubtedly getting better," said Geoff Want, principal adviser on airline safety at [Rio Tinto Group](#), a global mining company that has its own list of carriers approved for employee travel.

Government regulators in Europe and the U.S. take different approaches to aviation safety.

The European Union evaluates airlines and their planes and publishes a "blacklist" of unacceptable carriers, most recently updated just two weeks ago. The EU blacklist is available on the Internet at http://ec.europa.eu/transport/air-ban/doc/list_en.pdf.

Be prepared, it's long and complex: 233 airlines are completely banned, and eight are allowed to operate under restrictions and conditions. Though its focus started as an airline-by-airline evaluation, the EU has moved more toward building the blacklist on evaluations of entire countries—all airlines from 15 countries have a blanket ban from the EU, and are among the 233 cited.

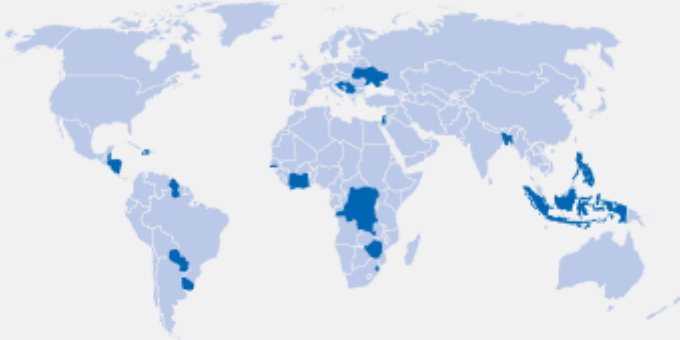
Evaluating Countries

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration evaluates countries, not carriers. U.S. inspectors decide if a country's aviation infrastructure is up to snuff by counting the number of inspectors watching over airlines, assessing air-traffic-control procedures and evaluating funding and legal authority of aviation regulators. The FAA evaluation is based largely on standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations-chartered group. (U.S. airlines are required to meet or exceed international safety standards.)

The FAA says 101 countries have been assessed; 79 have Category 1 status, meaning the U.S. believes the country meets international standards, and 22 fall into Category 2. Category 2 doesn't mean airlines from that country are banned, only that any new service and airline passenger-sharing ties are frozen. That can have economic impact on a country and its airlines, and the threat of a Category 2 downgrade can prompt improvement. India, for example, was notified it didn't meet standards and was given time to make changes. Earlier this year, after India increased the number of airline inspectors and made other changes, the FAA declared India met the requirements to remain in Category 1.

Flight Warning

Countries that do not meet international aviation safety standards, according to the Federal Aviation Administration:



Bangladesh	Israel
Belize	Kiribati*
Ivory Coast	Nauru*
Croatia	Nicaragua
Democratic Republic of Congo	Paraguay
Gambia	Philippines
Ghana	Serbia and Montenegro
Guyana	Swaziland
Haiti	Ukraine
Honduras	Uruguay
Indonesia	Zimbabwe

* Not shown on map

Source: FAA

The FAA won't discuss specific reasons why a country is listed in Category 2 except to say all assessments are fact-based evaluations. In the case of Israel, which is Category 2, aviation-industry officials say that U.S. concerns relate to air-traffic-control routings for passenger jets at some Israeli airports that don't meet international standards.

An FAA spokeswoman says its International Aviation Safety Assessments list, available at <http://www.faa.gov/about/initiatives/iasa/media/iasaws.xls>, is "one tool a consumer can use to decide on air travel."

There's surprisingly little overlap between the FAA and EU lists. Airlines from Angola, Benin, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Liberia, Gabon, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Rwanda and Zambia are banned on the EU blacklist, but those countries aren't evaluated at all by the FAA. Both EU and U.S. regulators share concerns on Congo, Indonesia and Swaziland. The FAA rates Zimbabwe, Israel, the Philippines, Serbia and Montenegro plus several Latin American and Caribbean nations, including Belize, Haiti, Honduras and Nicaragua, in Category 2, but not the EU.

Improvements in Safety

Safety experts say both the European blacklist and the FAA's country categorizing have led to safety improvements. "Both are crude tools. They aren't perfect tools. But they have caused people to step up to safety," said William Voss, chief executive of the Flight Safety Foundation, an international nonprofit group that promotes aviation safety.

The airline industry has come up with its own list of sorts, and it can be useful to travelers. The International Air Transport Association (IATA), the industry's world-wide trade group, began working

on a standard auditing regimen nine years ago, and it has evolved into an extensive safety check now required of all airlines to be a member of IATA. Passing the audit became mandatory for membership earlier this year; 21 airlines didn't and were removed.

The air-transport association put together a cocktail of standards to create the IATA Operational Safety Audit, or IOSA, borrowing from EU and U.S. requirements as well as ICAO, the UN organization. The association hires eight firms to check processes and procedures at airlines, and inspects some aircraft but not all.

Guenther Matschnigg, the IATA's senior vice president for safety, operations and infrastructure, said the requirements include things that make indisputable sense, such as enhanced ground-proximity warning devices in cockpits, which sound an alarm for pilots when flying toward a mountain or other hazard. Those devices, required for U.S. airlines, are only recommended by ICAO standards. To comply with air-transport-association requirements, several airlines had to install the warning devices.

"We put some teeth into it," Mr. Matschnigg said.

IATA says 330 airlines around the world have passed its audit. Of those, 230 are IATA members—another 100 airlines wanted to be certified even if not IATA members. U.S. and EU regulators accept IOSA certification to meet requirements that airlines funneling passengers to each other through code-sharing agreements audit each other for safety issues. And a few countries—Egypt is one—require IOSA certification for any airline flying there. The list is available at <http://www.iata.org/ps/certification/iosa/Registry?Query=all>.

Lower Accident Rates

IATA says certified airlines have a 30% to 40% lower accident rate than non-certified airlines. In 2008, for example, noncertified airlines have had a "hull-loss" rate—aircraft damaged beyond repair—of 0.81 per million flights, while certified airlines had a hull-loss rate of 0.52 per million flights, 36% lower.

At London-based Rio Tinto, Mr. Want, a former safety and operations executive at British Airways PLC, uses the IOSA-certification list to help compile his own list of airlines approved for company travel. Rio Tinto's list, which currently has 213 approved airlines, is updated monthly. Rio Tinto uses a second list of 30 airlines that can be booked only with Mr. Want's approval. (The lists are available only to Rio Tinto employees.)

"We do that because it's best to keep a very close eye on them," he said of his second list.

For travelers, safety experts like Mr. Voss and Mr. Want suggest the best advice is to check the IATA registry and make sure any airline you book has passed an audit. After that, check to see if the airline is part of an international alliance, Mr. Voss says. Being part of an alliance gives you some assurance that the carrier is stable and respected.

Also check the FAA and the European blacklist. "If it's on the blacklist, obviously there's a problem," Mr. Voss said.

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