

Kazakh Diplomat in Jet Hijacking

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Kazakh diplomat Valery Tolmachev, second left, being escorted by police from the Rome airport on Monday. **Alessandro Bianchi**

A Kazakh diplomat tried to hijack an Alitalia flight from Paris to Rome, demanding it be flown to Libya, but was quickly overpowered and arrested when the plane landed.

Witnesses said Valery Tolmachev, 48, put a small knife to the throat of a flight attendant and held her for a few minutes during the Sunday night flight.

"The man grabbed the stewardess from behind her back and pointed the knife. She was in difficulty and tried to turn around," a passenger named Sofia told reporters in Rome.

Stefanie, a French woman who lives in Italy, said the man laughed when the stewardess asked him to go the front of the plane with her.

"He held her for just a few minutes and then the other flight attendants intervened and passengers helped hold the man to the floor," she said.

Italian news agency ANSA said Tolmachev had brandished a nailclipper against the flight

attendant.

Tolmachev lives in Paris with his mother and has worked as an aide in Kazakhstan's permanent mission to UNESCO since 2002, Interfax reported.

A childhood friend in Kazakhstan said he was dumbfounded by the attempted hijacking.

"Valery has never done this kind of thing before," the friend, Rustem Tursunbayev, told Interfax in Astana. "He is quiet by nature, a nondrinker, no drugs."

He said Tolmachev graduated from Moscow State University with top marks and once accompanied Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev to the United States as an interpreter.

Rome airport police took Tolmachev into custody for questioning.

A statement from Alitalia said Tolmachev had "assaulted a flight attendant and asked that the plane be taken to Tripoli."

Other flight attendants on flight AZ329 then overpowered Tolmachev, who was "clearly agitated," and the captain radioed police, who arrested the man when the plane landed, the statement said.

Alitalia said the flight attendant was checked by staff at the airport's first-aid office as a precaution, but she was reported to be unharmed.

All 131 passengers aboard the flight disembarked safely.

(MT, Reuters, AP)

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