

Bees on a Plane Highlight VIPs' Sins

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Talk about an odd plane incident.

Passengers aboard a Moscow-bound Boeing 757 flying from Blagoveshchensk were in for a nasty shock when bees started buzzing around the cabin mid-flight, Yakutia Airlines said Thursday.

A tipsy business-class passenger, it turned out, had smuggled two beehives on board at the request of the Blagoveshchensk airport's deputy director, who wanted them shipped to Moscow.

The shipment did not go smoothly, though. As soon as the Yakutia jet reached cruising altitude, the bees began to creep out of the two cardboard boxes that served as their hives, the airline said by e-mail.

The flight attendants managed to seal the bees inside the plane's wardrobe in the business-class section — where the boxes were held — by taping shut the wardrobe's doors.

It was not immediately clear whether the bees had actually stung anyone during the 10-hour, 40-minute flight, but several passengers panicked, the airline said.

The incident, which took place on May 28 but was first reported Thursday by Rossiiskaya Gazeta, promises to raise concerns about the privileges afforded to VIP travelers on Russian flights.

Baggage handlers at the Blagoveshchensk airport told Rossiiskaya Gazeta that a senior official "can carry on board anything he likes."

Spokespeople for Moscow's Vnukovo, Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo airports told The Moscow Times that there are no separate screening rules for VIP and regular passengers.

But in practice, flight safety rules are often violated, especially — though not exclusively — by VIP travelers.

The bee-carrying 757 jet arrived at Vnukovo Airport on schedule, Yakutia Airlines said. But passengers had to wait two hours to collect their luggage because the flight engineer and airline officials had to kill the bees with the anti-bug spray Dichlorvos after police either failed to call sanitary and emergency officials at the pilot's request or the officials simply failed to respond.

Consequently, the next leg of the plane's flight, to Barcelona, was delayed. When the plane arrived in Barcelona, the next crew discovered five bees that managed to survive the insecticide in the cabin.

The beehive smuggler, whose name was not released, said the airport's deputy director, Anatoly Smirnov, had asked him to hand the bees over to an unidentified person in Moscow, the airline said.

Smirnov could not be reached for comment Thursday.

A passenger said the man with the bees was "slightly drunk" upon boarding, documents provided by the airline said.

Blagoveshchensk is a city in the far eastern Amur region and located on the border with China.

After the incident, the airline requested that Blagoveshchensk prosecutors check the airport's observance of safety rules. The subsequent check found unspecified violations that the airport's management was ordered to eliminate, the airline said.

A violation of flight safety rules carries a fine of 2,500 rubles (\$86) for officials and up to 5,000 rubles for legal entities. It was unclear whether anyone had been fined over the beehive incident.

Repeated calls to transport prosecutors in Blagoveshchensk, which is six time zones ahead of Moscow, went unanswered Thursday.

The bee incident was far from the first violation of flight safety rules by VIP travelers.

In June, Irkutsk Governor Dmitry Mezentsev ordered that an Aeroflot jet ready for takeoff be grounded for an hour because he was running late for the flight.

Other governors have also been accused of holding up commercial flights.

Over New Year's, when Moscow airports were paralyzed by freezing rain, media reported that Sheremetyevo Airport officials canceled the boarding passes of dozens of passengers on a flight to allow State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov to depart in comfort in a half-filled plane. Gryzlov denied the story, first reported by A Just Russia, a rival to his United Russia party.

Last summer, transportation prosecutors accused the Vladivostok airport of slacking off on security measures after a video went online showing a VIP passenger, also a prosecutor, ignoring metal detectors before boarding his flight and facing no objections from airport staff, news site Vladtime.ru reported in May. No charges were reported following the incident.

In April 2005, then-Moscow metro chief Dmitry Gayev attempted to grab a flight attendant by the neck while drunk on an Aeroflot flight to Japan.

In a reverse situation in July 2004, three male flight attendants on an Aeroflot flight from Moscow to Nizhnevartovsk in western Siberia reportedly got drunk and beat up a passenger who complained about poor service.

Meanwhile, in a story that matches the bees incident, the Zapashnye brothers, who are celebrity animal handlers, have asked the management of the Rostov-on-Don airport to allow them to fly with a caged white tiger cub in the cabin of a plane rather than the cargo hold.

The management was considering the request Thursday, Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported.

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