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Bomb Scare Forces Aeroflot Landing in Iceland

By Jonathan Earle

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Passengers stand and wait for information Thursday afternoon in a Reykjavik airplane hangar after being forced to disembark a flight to Moscow. **Pavel Kushelev**

Icelandic police detained a "Ukrainian" passenger shortly after a bomb threat forced a New York-to-Moscow flight to make an emergency landing in Reykjavik on Thursday, an eyewitness said.

"He was a white guy, late 40s-50s, balding, pudgy, short. Four or five guards grabbed him, put him in handcuffs, and took him out. He didn't resist," passenger Mitchell Joachim said by telephone.

Iceland's National Crisis Coordination Center declined to confirm whether anyone had been arrested. Police had not discovered any explosives as of Thursday evening, but checks continued, a spokeswoman said.

Aeroflot flight SU-103, carrying 256 passengers, was diverted to Iceland's largest airport, Keflavik International, after U.S. authorities received a bomb threat while the plane was in mid-air, an Aeroflot spokeswoman said by telephone.

An unidentified caller said five suitcases were rigged to explode as the airplane arrived at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, an air transportation source told Interfax.

The Airbus A330 landed safely at 6:27 a.m. local time in Reykjavik, a local airport spokesman said by telephone. There were no reports of injuries.

Icelandic police detained the "Ukrainian" after passengers were searched and hustled into a "gigantic" hanger, Joachim said.

“The people he was talking to said he was a Ukrainian with no accent and seemed to be really nice. That's all they knew. I still don't know who the man was,” he said.

The Associated Press reported that two passengers were briefly taken into custody for questioning but were released. The conflicting statements about the number of detainees could not immediately be reconciled.

Joachim added that passengers were kept in the dark about the bomb threat, even after landing.

“They said we were going to land immediately because of a technical issue. ... I first heard about the bomb threat from a fellow passenger who heard it through the Russian news,” he said.

After landing, the passengers were held in the plane for about 90 minutes before police armed with assault rifles escorted them to the hanger, where they were visited by American and Russian consular officials as well as Red Cross workers, who handed out food and drinks.

“It's 12 degrees [Celsius] in the hanger. Everybody's in light clothing, so they've handed out scraps of broadcloth,” tweeted passenger Pavel Kushelev, who works for the VGTRK state media holding.

Carry-on baggage was dumped into a giant pile, and each of the passengers was patted down by security officers. Luggage was returned at about 2 p.m. local time.

“Everyone seems to be OK. They were really good about taking care of little kids and families, whom they searched first. Now we're just sitting in clusters on these chairs they provided for us,” Joachim said, adding that no airline staff was in the hanger.

An urban designer and architect, Joachim is scheduled to deliver a lecture at the Strelka Institute on Friday.

“I'm exhausted. It's a long flight. I guess the people here in Iceland handled it pretty well as far as I can tell. They're really nice. I don't know what else they can do. I hope they catch the guys who did this and beat the living crap out of them,” he said.

The stranded passengers were scheduled to be flown from Iceland to Moscow, arriving at

Sheremetyevo at 3:30 a.m. Friday, RIA-Novosti reported, citing the airline's press service.

Also on Thursday, two separate Russian flights were delayed after bomb threats.

A Moscow-bound flight from Voronezh was postponed after a man called in a hoax bomb threat, police said in a statement.

The 28-year-old was throwing a drunken sendoff for his friend at Domodedovo Airport when he called police about the alleged plot.

In Nizhny Novgorod, police detained a woman suspected of phoning in fake information about a bomb on a Turkey-bound plane in order to derail her sister's vacation after getting into an argument.

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