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Russia's Bid to Lease Planes From Ethiopia Falls Through Amid Sanctions Pressure

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Ethiopian Airlines aircraft at Bole International Airport. **Captain Raju / commons.wikimedia**

Russia's latest attempt to bolster its struggling fleet of commercial aircraft by leasing planes from Ethiopia has ended in failure, Ethiopian media reported, as international sanctions continue to isolate the country's aviation sector.

According to the Addis Insight media outlet, officials from Ethiopia's Civil Aviation Authority (ECAA) rejected the Russian delegation's request during talks in Addis Ababa in late July, saying it lacked the authority to instruct the country's flag carrier Ethiopian Airlines to lease aircraft.

Ethiopian Airlines Group CEO Mesfin Tasew confirmed that no substantive negotiations had taken place with Russian officials and that no agreement had been reached.

"Russia is under U.S. sanctions, and Ethiopian Airlines has strong operational and commercial

ties with the United States," Tasew said. "We operate under international regulations and U.S. law, and we are not willing to take the risk of violating those laws."

Tasew added that Ethiopian Airlines is actively seeking additional aircraft to meet growing demand for passenger and cargo transport, making a lease to Russia even less likely.

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Russia had reportedly been pursuing a wet lease arrangement — where aircraft are leased with crew included — for use on domestic routes. The negotiations were led by Yaroslav Tarasyuk, Russia's trade representative in Ethiopia, according to aviation database ch-aviation.

Similar outreach efforts in 2024 to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait and Qatar also failed to produce concrete deals.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions have prevented Russian carriers from purchasing or servicing Western-made aircraft. Boeing and Airbus previously accounted for two-thirds of Russia's commercial aircraft fleet and carried 90% of all passengers.

Without access to original spare parts or proper maintenance, Russian airlines have been plagued by technical failures.

According to the exiled news website Novaya Gazeta Europa, there were 208 aviation incidents in Russia in 2024, up 25% from the previous year. Nearly half of those incidents were tied to engine failures or landing gear malfunctions.

In the wake of sanctions, the Kremlin announced an ambitious plan to revive the domestic aviation industry, promising to restore Soviet-era production levels and deliver over 1,000 Russian-made aircraft to airlines by 2030.

That plan, however, has largely stalled. Only five aircraft have rolled off Russian production lines since the start of the war, the Kommersant business daily reported: three Tu-214 jets and two Il-96-300s.

Under the original timeline, Russian carriers were supposed to receive five domestically produced aircraft in 2023, followed by 35 more in 2024 — including Sukhoi Superjets, Tu-214s, MC-21 regional jets and Il-114-300 turboprops.

Annual production was slated to reach 120 aircraft by 2026, and by 2028, more than 200. But in early 2025, the Russian government quietly scaled back those targets, cutting production goals by half.

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