RUSSIAN MISSILE STRIKES IN SYRIA TRIGGER EUROPEAN ALERT TO AIRLINES

News / Airlines



Russia' long-range missile strikes against targets in Syria last week have prompted global aviation officials to issue safety alerts to airlines operating over Iraq, Iran, and the Caspian Sea amid heightened concerns about the risk to commercial flying near conflict zones.

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Russia's firing of cruise missiles against Syrian targets from the Caspian Sea and the broader regional conflict led the United Nations' aviation arm and the agency that oversees European airspace to issue parallel warnings about potential serious risks to flights traversing a region that includes busy routes linking Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

The International Civil Aviation Organization, the U.N.'s air-safety arm, said Friday it had been informed that some carriers had opted to take alternative routes.

Early Sunday, aircraft continued to cross the Caspian Sea and the busy north-south route over western Iran that connects the big three Persian Gulf airport hubs to Europe and the U.S., according to Flightradar24, an online airline tracking service. However, it also flagged a shift by airlines to direct more aircraft over Saudi Arabia and Egypt rather than Iran.

Eurocontrol, the pan-European air traffic control agency, said in a notice to airlines Saturday that there had been no significant change in carrier's routes within its region.

Despite resumption of generally normal traffic Sunday on established air routes over the Caspian Sea and Iran, officials at ICAO and Eurocontrol were preparing contingency plans in the event of further disruptions, according to one person participating in the discussions. As many as 800 flights a day could be affected if those heavily used corridors are deemed unsafe or, under extreme circumstances, become unavailable.

With the situation fluid and most big carriers reassessing routing decisions day by day, according to this person, the contingency plans include potential restrictions on alternate routes over the Mediterranean and Greece. The goal is to ensure controllers handling that airspace wouldn't be overwhelmed in case of a sudden shift in traffic.

Meanwhile, ICAO has sent formal letters to Russia, Turkey and Iran, urging transparency and asking them to make information public about current or potential future threats to commercial flights, this person said. But ICAO has no enforcement tool, and it is up to of each government to determine what information to release.

If Caspian or Iranian routes are curtailed, industry officials said, Gulf carriers would face the biggest problems because such a large portion of their traffic flows through those regions. Relying on alternate airways would mean longer flights and significantly greater fuel burn.

The latest turmoil follows months of discussions between ICAO, Eurocontrol and airline representatives about opening up additional Caspian Sea routes to relieve congestion already affecting some flights between Europe and the Middle East. But now, in the wake of the Russian missile attacks, proponents of that initiative are likely to have an uphill battle to generate support from industry and national authorities.

Russia's announcement that it had fired cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea against Syrian targets -- nearly 1,000 miles away -- prompted the European Aviation Safety Agency to issue a safety information bulletin to airlines on Oct. 9.

"Before reaching Syria, such missiles are necessarily crossing the airspace above Caspian Sea, Iran and Iraq, below flight routes which are used by commercial transport airplanes," said the organization, which is based in Cologne, Germany.

Safety bulletins are issued to alert airlines about potential hazards to commercial flights and used by airlines to make flight plans. The agency said it had no specific recommendations on what

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actions airlines should take. Eurocontrol said it was monitoring the situation via teleconferences with airlines and air traffic control officials.

The U.S. and other Western countries have denounced the strikes. Russia denies U.S. assertions some of the missiles fell short, landing in Iran. Fighting in Iraq has previously triggered such notices and led to restrictions on operating in some Iraqi airspace.

Airline-safety authorities have become particularly attuned to the risk of flying near conflict zones after Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was downed on July 17, 2014, while cruising at 33,000 feet over eastern Ukraine on a flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. All 298 people onboard the Boeing Co. 777 jetliner were killed.

Ukraine and the U.S. accuse pro-Russian separatist rebels of having shot down the plane with a sophisticated antiaircraft missile. Russia denies the claim. The Dutch Safety Board, which is leading the probe into the crash, is due to release its final report on the downing of the Malaysian jetliner on Tuesday.

Ukrainian authorities had declared the airspace where the Malaysian plane was brought down safe. Still, the incident has prompted air-safety authorities to improve the sharing of information about potential dangers to flights operating near battlefields.

EASA has opened talks with military representatives in Europe to find ways to tap intelligence gathered by those organizations to keep commercial air travel safe.

The European safety agency also is examining a surge in recent Russian long-range military patrols by combat jets and bomber aircraft along the borders of European Union member states. The Russian military planes frequently don't employ transponders that can help identify the aircraft to commercial air traffic.

The flights, which Russia previously has said aren't provocative, have prompted European militaries to launch jet fighters to identify the aircraft.

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