

Two East Coast planes grounded

Problems similar to those of Alaska Airlines crash keep planes on ground

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Two Alaska Airlines MD-80 series planes were grounded on Thursday after problems were found in the jackscrews, a focus of the investigation into the crash of Alaska Flight 261.

The problems were discovered in Seattle and in Portland, Ore., during inspections that started after a damaged section of the jackscrew was pulled from the wreckage of Flight 261, which was an MD-83.

The planes "were found to have metal filings or shavings in or around the horizontal stabilizer jackscrews," said Ted Lopatkiewicz, spokesman for the National Transportation Safety Board.

"And so they are being withheld from service until our investigators can get there and look at them. Our investigators will be getting to them today."

The jackscrew drives the horizontal stabilizer, a wing-like device on the tail that controls a plane's up-and-down motion.

It is powered by two motors and resembles the corkscrew-like device that opens many automatic garage

doors. If it were damaged during a flight, aviation experts said, the pilots would not be able to control the pitch of the aircraft.

Flight 261's cockpit voice recorder revealed that pilots had problems with the horizontal stabilizer after taking off from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, for San Francisco and Seattle.

The plane plunged into the sea on Jan. 31, killing 88 people.

A damaged 2-foot section of the jackscrew was recovered this week with the main wreckage of the MD-83 about 10 miles off the coast. The NTSB was trying to determine whether the screw's threads were stripped and whether the damage was a possible cause or an effect of the crash.

On Wednesday, Boeing Co. urged all airlines that fly MD-80 jetliners and related aircraft to inspect their fleets for evidence of damage.

Several, including Alaska, had started their inspections before the manufacturer's announcement.

Alaska checked 31 of its 34 MD-80s, and found two with shavings around the jackscrew. An airline

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Eliot Brenner
FAA spokesman

spokesman refused to comment further.

Nearly 70 airlines worldwide fly about 2,000 of the planes being inspected. All major U.S. airlines had an inspection program under way today.

Alaska, American and Delta airlines started their inspections before Boeing issued its recommendation, and they cautioned that the action could result in some minor scheduling delays.

Delta said no problems had been found in initial inspections. Other than Alaska, the other airlines, including Northwest, Continental and US Airways, did not immediately disclose their findings.

The Federal Aviation Administration said it will study the inspection records and order further action if it finds evidence of a safety

problem.

"This is the right and prudent thing to do," FAA spokesman Eliot Brenner said.

"We've been talking to the carriers and strongly encouraging them to make this inspection as rapidly as possible."

Boeing announced in 1997 it would phase out the MD-80 and MD-90 passenger aircraft models it inherited when it bought McDonnell Douglas.

Meanwhile, about 400 people attended a Wednesday night memorial in Seattle for the victims, many of whom were from Washington state.

"This is a real tough time," said Kelly Ryan, a United Airlines flight attendant who lost family members in the crash.

"I think everyone is still in a state of shock."

Hijacking leads to increased security

■ Afghan airline will carry armed commandos to prevent another hijacking.

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Hoping to prevent another hijacking, the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar says armed commandos will be on board all flights of the state-run airline from now on.

After about half the 150 people flown to Britain on a hijacked Afghan airliner sought asylum on Thursday, the Taliban also appealed to British authorities to punish the hijackers.

"They must be punished, otherwise it will be an example for others that they can hijack a plane and get asylum if that is what they want," said Civil Aviation Minister Akhtar Mohammed Manzoor. "It's not right that they should endanger all the passengers to get asylum."

Whether the hijackers themselves have requested asylum is still unclear. But few people in the Afghan capital were surprised to hear that the four-day drama had ended with so many Afghans asking to stay in Britain.

While the aftermath unfolded at an airport outside London, it was a typical day in Kabul, where beggars roam rocket-ruined streets and children shuffle through the snow in plastic sandals. For most of the city's one million people, a piece of bread is the only food they can afford.

"It's no wonder that so many people want to live outside this country. We have nothing here — look at us," said Ghulam Nabi, an unemployed laborer with seven children. "In this country is poverty, 20 years of fighting, no work, no money, including me. I have nothing."

During 20 years of war, first against Soviet soldiers and later between warring Islamic factions, mil-

lions of Afghans have left their homeland in search of peace.

Private and public refugee agencies say Afghans make up one of the world's largest refugee populations, second only to Palestinians. Since 1979, when the first Soviet soldiers rumbled across the Afghan frontier to shore up a government allied with Moscow, 6 million people have left the country.

While many have returned to their homes, agencies estimate 2.6 million Afghans still live as refugees, most of them in neighboring Pakistan and Iran. One million Afghans live as refugees in their own country.

"Everyone wants to leave the country because of no work, no money. This is not new," said Abdul Wahed, a pharmacist. "These people on the plane, for only \$20 they are in Europe where there is food, money and work. There is everything there."

Most of Afghanistan is ruled by

"These people on the plane, for only \$20 they are in Europe..."

Abdul Wahed
pharmacist

the hard-line Taliban religious army, which espouses a strict brand of Islam that is particularly difficult for women — who have been forced out of work — and girls, who have been refused permission to attend school beyond age 8.

The opposition, a collection of small parties led by ousted President Burhanuddin Rabbani, destroyed nearly 70 percent of the Afghan capital in bitter factional fighting before being thrown out by the Taliban in 1996.

Marriage tax bill wins House passage

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dispatching an election-year valentine, Republicans won House passage Thursday of legislation that would cut income taxes \$182 billion over 10 years for all married taxpayers, including the 25 million couples who pay a "marriage penalty" compared with single people.

The vote, timed to coincide with Valentine's Day next week, was 268-158 to send the bill to the Senate. Although 48 Democrats joined all Republicans in favor, it was short of a veto-proof edge.

Senate passage is far from certain, and President Clinton is threatening a veto over the bill's cost and timing, yet House GOP leaders trumpeted the measure as the first in a series of tax cuts that would return a portion of projected budget surpluses to taxpayers and limit the growth of government.

"We need a tax code that doesn't punish married couples," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.

"They need to buy braces for the kids. They need to buy insurance for the

car and the home. They don't need the federal government picking their pocket."

It was a day for politicians of every stripe to ally themselves with the popular issue, even if they opposed this particular bill. Despite his veto warning, Clinton said at a Capitol Hill appearance: "We know we should do this."

However, he wants marriage penalty tax relief targeted more toward lower- and middle-class taxpayers.

The "marriage penalty" occurs because millions of couples who file joint tax returns are forced to pay taxes at higher rates than they would if they were single and filing separately, especially if each spouse earns roughly the same income.

Democrats complained that half of the bill's total tax cut would go to couples who already receive a bonus and would consume a large chunk of the projected budget surplus before plans are laid to ensure the future solvency of Social Security and Medicare, to pay down the national debt and to guarantee adequate government spending.

WEATHER

TODAY

TOMORROW

Scattered snow showers
high 24, low 15

Mostly cloudy
high 31, low 20

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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 20, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year, weekly during the summer sessions. The public has access to the Publications Board.

Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by calling (402) 472-2588.

Subscriptions are \$60 for one year.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 20, 1400 R St., Lincoln NE 68588-0448. Periodical postage paid at Lincoln, NE.

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THE DAILY NEBRASKAN

World and Nation

Datelines

■ Russia

Despite Grozny defeat, rebel attacks continue

GROZNY, Russia (AP) — Rebels attacked two military trains and pulled the Russians into one of the fiercest battles since abandoning the Chechen capital, officials said Thursday.

The ambush, and increasingly frequent guerrilla attacks on Russian units elsewhere, demonstrated that bands of well-armed rebels are still able to move around Chechnya in spite of the military's claims to control most of the republic.

The train had been sent to repair railroad tracks north of the capital Grozny, but was crippled Tuesday near the town of Argun when rebels detonated three remote-controlled mines under its locomotive and opened fire.

■ Washington

Steve Forbes abandons run for presidential nomination

WASHINGTON (AP) — Steve Forbes cashed it in Thursday and ended his costly quest for the Republican presidential nomination, saying "we were nosed out by a landslide."

He said he left with no regrets, offered no candidate endorsements, and said "no" to the question of running in New Jersey for the Senate.

Campaign workers, 80 or so, applauded a final reprise of the flat tax, anti-abortion speech he'd used in his second truncated presidential campaign.

He spent more than \$30 million of his publishing fortune on the 2000 campaign, and more than \$37 million in 1996.

■ Virginia

Girl sentenced to 18 years for second-degree murder

MANASSAS, Va. (AP) — A teen-age girl who beat a young mother to death over a traffic dispute was sentenced Thursday to 18 years in prison.

Kurebia Hampton, 17, read a statement apologizing to the family of Natalie Giles Davis, 24, who was killed in a scuffle that broke out last June in Dale City, Va.

Hampton could have received up to 40 years in prison for her second-degree murder conviction.

Davis and her family were headed to church when they encountered a car blocking the road out of their cul-de-sac.

Davis exchanged harsh words with the teen-agers, who jumped in another car and blocked the one Davis was riding in.

After Davis got out of her car, a fight broke out, and her head was slammed to the ground and kicked. She died several days later.

■ Tennessee

Infamous 'Ernest' Jim Varney, dies of lung cancer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Jim Varney, the rubbernecked comic who portrayed his rube character "Ernest" from hundreds of television commercials to a series of movies, died Thursday. He was 50.

Varney died of lung cancer at his home in White House, Tenn., about 20 miles north of Nashville, said his attorney Hoot Gibson.

Varney became a cult figure in the 1980s in a series of regional commercials, portraying Ernest P. Worrell, a know-it-all good ol' boy whose best-known phrase was "Know-what-I-mean?" and who addressed a character known as "Vern."