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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

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STATEMENT ISSUED BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE
BOSTON, MASS. -- WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 1970

Although the incident involving the Eastern Airlines shuttle flight here on March 17, which brought us here today, still has not been classified as either an attempted suicide or a hijacking attempt, it still concerns aircraft security. And a major aspect of such security is aircraft hijacking.

One year ago, the hijacking of U. S. aircraft had reached alarming proportions -- 14 between January 1 and March 25. During the same period this year, the number has dropped to 3. However, while U. S. hijackings have been declining, foreign ones have been increasing, almost in direct proportion. Eight foreign countries experienced their first hijackings last year alone. In addition to the U. S., 38 other countries have had hijackings.

One year and one week ago, we introduced an anti-hijacking system developed by a special Task Force on the Deterrence of Air Piracy created within the Federal Aviation Administration. After months of field testing, it was placed in operation by Eastern Airlines in mid-October. TWA joined in the program in December and Pan Am in January. FAA Administrator John H. Shaffer, who is here with me today, tells me the airlines are highly enthusiastic over the system.

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However, we realize the system has limited coverage. Our immediate objective is to expand this coverage, which is what I promised the Air Line Pilots Association last Thursday when we met in Washington to discuss overall aircraft security. Unfortunately, the system was not in operation for that fateful Eastern flight, so I don't want to speculate further on whether it could have detected the gunman.

We believe this system is the best deterrence there is at the present time, but the reduction in U. S. hijackings cannot be attributed to the system alone. Deterrence cannot be measured, but Mr. Shaffer tells me airlines are beginning to find weapons discarded in boarding areas where the system is in use. Furthermore, the system is beginning to find weapons on passengers, but in the interest of security I do not want to discuss this further.

There are other developments taking place which I want to call your attention to in understanding what is happening to the hijacking problem.

(1) Hijackers are voluntarily returning to the U. S. in growing numbers to face prosecution, and they all talk of bad treatment in Cuba. From our best available information, only about half a dozen American hijackers still remain in Cuba.

(2) The hijacker who took the U. S. plane to Italy nearly five months ago is still in jail awaiting trial on eight counts, including kidnaping and assault.

(3) Contrary to what you may have heard, hijackers are being punished. Of 44 hijackers apprehended so far, 18 have been convicted. Sentences range from correctional school for five juveniles to 20 years for four men. Results are pending in 20 cases. Three men have been acquitted and three others were judged incompetent to stand trial.

(4) Progress continues on State Department and United Nations efforts to discourage hijacking by establishment of extradition and prosecution agreements. International pilots organizations have threatened to boycott countries who do not approve such agreements.

The FAA anti-hijacking system is geared to clear passengers. Search is accomplished as necessary, but only as a last resort.

The system is based on behavioral traits common to hijackers, and this is combined with a passive weapons screening device in a boarding area. Posters are displayed to warn passengers they and their baggage are subject to search.

Mr. Shaffer tells me that fewer than five persons per 1,000 passengers exhibit the basic behavioral traits. Of those interviewed by airlines personnel operating the system, a few have been searched but only one person was detained. None of the screened flights have been hijacked.

We are continuing our work, not only on improvements of the anti-hijacking system, but also on other measures to provide greater security for the passengers and crew while in flight.