

Airlines scrap Israel flights over missile fear



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In a sign of increased caution about flying near combat zones, U.S. and European airlines halted flights to Israel Tuesday after a rocket landed near Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport.

Delta Air Lines and United Airlines suspended service between the U.S. and Israel indefinitely. US Airways scrapped its one flight Tuesday to Tel Aviv. Germany's Lufthansa and Air France also suspended flights.

Following the action by the U.S. airlines, the Federal Aviation Administration prohibited U.S. airlines from flying to Tel Aviv for 24 hours.

Israeli police confirmed that a rocket from Gaza landed in an area near the airport on Tuesday. Police spokeswoman Luba Samri said the rocket landing was the closest to the airport since fighting between Israel and Hamas militants began on July 8.

Among those from St. Louis affected by the bans are a group of 12 young performers and adult chaperones with the Circus Harmony troupe, who had been scheduled to return on a United Airlines flight tonight. The performers, ages 10 to 20, are in northern Israel as part of the multicultural Galilee Arches Circus.

Since 2007, Circus Harmony's elite St. Louis Arches and the Jewish/Arab Galilee troupe have performed together to promote peace.

"We have 12 people there who are supposed to be back Wednesday night and as of right now, we have two flights booked for next Monday," said Karen Schellin, the group's general manager in St. Louis. "The soonest we can get anyone out is 12:15 Monday afternoon — and that's just two people. We can't get the others out until 11:10 p.m.

"No one knows when and if the ban will end before then," Schellin said. "Hopefully, it will end before the weekend.

"The travel agent said the situation is changing minute by minute," Schellin said. "I have a lot of parents concerned about their children." Aviation and legal experts said Tuesday that airlines are now taking risk assessment into their own hands, both for the safety of passengers and to avoid claims of negligence.

Aviation consultant Robert Mann said airlines are becoming more proactive in the wake of the Flight 17 disaster over Ukraine.

"It's really forcing every carrier, every business jet operator to do their own due diligence,

do their own risk assessment, given the geopolitical situation,” Mann said.

The flight ban came five days after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 with 298 people aboard was shot down over eastern Ukraine while flying at 33,000 feet. Some experts have second-guessed the airline’s decision to fly over an area where pro-Russian separatists are battling the Ukrainian army. But Malaysian officials have countered that the plane’s path from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was approved by international regulators.

Jonathan Reiter, a prominent New York aviation-accident attorney, said flying into an airport after a near-miss by a rocket could be used to show that the airline was negligent. That explains why airlines are suspending service to Israel.

“I’m sure it is human concern as well,” Reiter said, “but I think (the airlines) feel it is wise to err on the side of caution because it is their burden to prove they are doing everything possible to avoid injuries and deaths.”

Delta’s one daily flight was already in the air when the ban took effect. A Delta Boeing 747 from New York with 290 aboard was flying over the Mediterranean headed for Tel Aviv when it turned around and flew to Paris instead. Flight 468 had 273 passengers and 17 crew on board. US Airways and United flights that were scheduled to take off later in the day. A Delta spokesman declined to go beyond the details released in a statement.

Israel’s Transportation Ministry called on the airlines to reverse their decision and said the airport was “safe for landings and departures.”

U.N. CHIEF HAS HOPE

The U.N. secretary-general said Tuesday it is his “hope and belief” that his emergency mission to the Middle East will lead to an end to the fighting between Hamas and Israel “in the very near future.”

Ban Ki-moon told the Security Council by videoconference from the West Bank city of Ramallah that he could not publicly reveal details “at this highly sensitive moment.” As he started to address the council, a siren could be heard in the background.

The U.N. chief has also visited Qatar, Kuwait, Cairo and Jerusalem and said he will go on to Jordan and Saudi Arabia on what he called a mission “of solidarity and peace” to quickly end an escalating two-week war between Israelis and Hamas militants who control the Gaza Strip. Their third conflict in just over five years has already claimed the lives of at least 609 Palestinians, the vast majority civilians, and 29 Israelis — 27 soldiers and two civilians.

Margaret Gillerman of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.