

Australia considers banning laptops from airliner cabins

May 17 2017, by Rod McGuirk

Australia is considering following the United States and Britain in banning laptops from inbound airliner cabins, the prime minister said, but declined to explain whether the move was related to an Islamic State group threat that President Donald Trump discussed with Russian diplomats.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull revealed Tuesday that his government was "looking ... very closely" at the bans on laptops and tablets on flights from some Middle Eastern countries announced by the U.S. and Britain in March.

Questioned by reporters Wednesday, Turnbull refused to discuss the intelligence upon which a laptop ban was being considered or its source.

"As prime minister protecting our national security and the national interest, I have to be circumspect and discreet on matters of national security," Turnbull said. "My job is not to feed speculative commentary in the media."

Australia would "work very closely with our partners around the world" in constantly reviewing aviation security, he said.

Trump has been criticized for divulging classified information to Russians about the laptop threat posed by the Islamic State group.

Turnbull declined to say whether that information had also been shared

with Australia, which along the U.S., Britain, Canada and New Zealand makes up the "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing network.

"I can assure you the relationship between Australia and the United States in terms of intelligence sharing is as close as it possibly could be and we have no concerns about any other country ... having privileged access to information we don't have," Turnbull told reporters.

The White House has defended Trump discussing with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak last week an Islamic State group threat related to the use of laptop computers on aircraft.

Critics argue that Trump's disclosure of the highly classified information threatened to fray the U.S. intelligence partnership with Israel, which collected the information, and could be used by the Russians to find its source.

Turnbull met Trump for the first time in New York two weeks ago and hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Sydney in February, underscoring Australia's close ties to both countries.

The U.S. ban on laptops and tablets affects flights from Amman, Jordan; Kuwait City; Cairo; Istanbul; Jeddah and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Casablanca, Morocco; Doha, Qatar, and Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates.

The British security rules apply to flights from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

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