

US prepares to ban laptops on flights from Europe

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In this file photo dated Thursday, March 29, 2017, airport staff inform passengers at the check in area at Casablanca Mohammed V International Airport, Morocco. European governments alarmed at a proposed expansion of the ban on in-flight laptops and tablets to planes are holding urgent talks Friday May 12, 21017, with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (AP Photo/ Abdeljalil Bounhar, FILE)

The U.S. is expected to broaden its ban on in-flight laptops and tablets to

include planes from the European Union, a move that would create logistical chaos on the world's busiest corridor of air travel.

Alarmed at the proposal, which airline officials say is merely a matter of timing, European governments held urgent talks on Friday with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

The ban would affect trans-Atlantic routes that carry as many as 65 million people a year on over 400 daily flights, many of them business travelers who rely on their electronics to work during the flight.

The ban would dwarf in size the current one, which was put in place in March and affects about 50 flights per day from 10 cities, mostly in the Middle East.

Chief among the concerns are whether any new threat prompted the proposal and the relative safety of keeping in the cargo area a large number of electronics with lithium batteries, which have been known to catch fire. American officials were invited to Brussels next week to discuss the proposed ban, the EU said.

European Commission spokeswoman Anna-Kaisa Itkonen said the EU had no new information about a specific security concern.

U.S. officials have said the decision in March to bar laptops and tablets from the cabins of some international flights wasn't based on any specific threat but on longstanding concerns about extremists targeting jetliners.

Experts say a bomb in the cabin would be easier to make and require less explosive force than one in the cargo hold. Baggage in cargo usually goes through a more sophisticated screening process than carry-on bags.

Jeffrey Price, an aviation-security expert at Metropolitan State University of Denver, said the original ban focused on certain countries because their equipment to screen carry-on bags is not as effective as machines in the U.S.

A French official who was briefed about Friday's meeting said the Americans announced they wanted to extend the ban, and the Europeans planned to formulate a response in coming days. The official said the primary questions revolved around when and how—and not whether—the ban would be imposed.

The official spoke only on condition of anonymity to discuss the plan.

Jenny Burke, a Homeland Security spokeswoman, said no final decision has been made on expanding the restriction.

But Homeland Security officials met Thursday with high-ranking executives of the three leading U.S. airlines—American, Delta and United—and the industry's leading U.S. trade group, Airlines for America, to discuss expanding the laptop policy to flights arriving from Europe.

Two airline officials who were briefed on the discussions said Homeland Security gave no timetable for an announcement, but they were resigned to its inevitability. They spoke only on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the meeting publicly.

The U.S. airlines still hope to have a say in how the policy is put into effect at airports to minimize inconvenience to passengers. The initial ban on passengers bringing large electronics devices into the cabin hit hardest at Middle Eastern airlines.

Emirates, the Middle East's largest airline, this week cited the ban on

electronics as one of the reasons for an 80 percent drop in profits last year. It said the ban had a direct impact on demand for [air travel](#) into the U.S. and it faced rising costs from introducing complimentary laptop loans to some passengers.

Alain Bauer, president of the CNAPS, a French regulator of private-sector security agents, including those checking baggage and passengers in France's airports, predicted "chaotic" scenes initially if the ban was instituted.

"Imagine the number of people who carry their laptops and tablets onto planes—not just adults, but also children," he told the AP.

He said it would slow passage through security checks as people try to negotiate a way of keeping their laptops.

"It's not like losing your water bottle or your scissors. It will take more time to negotiate," he said.

"You need a lot of time to inform them and a lot of time for it to enter people's heads until it becomes a habit," he said. "After a week of quite big difficulties, 95 percent of people will understand the practicalities."

The head of the International Air Transport Association said recently that the electronics ban is not an acceptable or effective long-term solution to security threats, and said the commercial impact is severe.

An industry-backed group, the Airline Passenger Experience Association, said the U.S. government should consider alternatives. That could include routinely testing laptops for chemical residues associated with bombs, requiring owners to turn on their devices, and letting frequent travelers keep their electronics with them.

The group's CEO, Joe Leader, noted that airlines have reduced service by more than 1 million long-haul seats in the 10 Middle Eastern and North African cities affected by the March policy. If it spreads to Europe, "it's simply a matter of time" before laptops are banned in the cabins of domestic U.S. flights, he said.

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