

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Contact:

Dr. Todd Curtis  
The AirSafe.com Foundation  
24 Roy St., #302  
Seattle, WA 98109  
Phone: 206-300-8727  
<http://www.AirSafe.org>  
info@airsafe.org

### Dr. Todd Curtis of The AirSafe.com Foundation Discusses the Safest Airlines in the World

Seattle, WA – April 1, 2006 – In late March, the European Union published a list of 96 airlines that were either banned from flying in the European Union or had their operations severely restricted. To the average traveler, the message was that these airlines were in some way unsafe, and that blacklisting the airlines was protecting the public from danger. This was an important step, but for many passengers, the actions of the European Union did not address other fundamental concerns such as how to evaluate the airlines that are not blacklisted.

It seems that the major criteria of the European Union wasn't whether airlines had been involved in any recent passenger deaths. In fact, among these 96 airlines, The AirSafe.com Foundation has identified exactly one that was involved in a fatal event involving passengers within the last decade. The most important criteria appeared to be status of the national aviation authorities overseeing an airline. Of the 96 airlines, 84 were based in countries where either the national aviation authority lacked oversight capability or where that authority did not cooperate with the evaluation process. Of those 84 airlines, only seven faced restrictions because of deficiencies in the airline.

This focus on national aviation authorities does not deal with the issues that concern passengers. Simply put, based on the questions that are sent to AirSafe.com, the average passenger cares about whether the airline is safe, not if the national authority overseeing the airline meets or exceeds some standard. More specifically, the kind of question that comes up repeatedly is not whether an airline is safe, but which airline is the safest.

AirSafe.com does not answer that question in part because deciding whether a particular airline or even a particular flight is safe is a judgment call that depends on the perspective of the passenger. If you were to ask 100 passengers on a particular flight to rank that flight's level of safety on a scale of 1 to 100, it is likely that the numbers will be spread all over the scale. The only thing for certain is that if a person is on a flight, that person thinks it is safe enough.

Based on the traffic to AirSafe.com, it is clear that pages of the site that are of greatest interest are those that identify fatal events involving passengers, and those that identify airlines without fatal events. Accidents that lead to passenger deaths are very rare occurrences, even for the airlines that were blacklisted by the European Union. As regular visitors to AirSafe.com know, the site focuses on events where passengers are killed. The simple reason is that public interest in airline safety peaks when passengers die or when their lives are threatened. This was as true in the early years of the site for events like TWA Flight 800, and it is just as true now in the post 9/11 era for events such as last year's fiery but non-fatal crash of an Air France A340 in Toronto.

There is another basic reason why this site focuses on these kinds of events. Simply put, while there is no universal definition of safety, based on the comments sent to AirSafe.com over the years, the majority of visitors will probably agree that a safe flight is one where no one gets hurt or killed. Beyond that, any two people are likely to have two different ideas of what safety means. Safety is a subjective concept, and it is difficult if not impossible to come up with a definition of safety that is both objective and measurable.

By comparison, it is very easy to come up with a risk definition that is easily measured and compared. For example, AirSafe.com focuses on fatalities so one of the measurements used on the site is fatal events per million flights. While it is easy to define, a risk measurement doesn't reflect how a person feels about safety. For example, if an airline has 10 years of accident free operations and then has an event that kills dozens of passengers on a flight, the risk as defined by fatal events per million flights increases, but it does not follow that the airline suddenly becomes too unsafe to fly. The average person would have a different opinion about an airline's level of safety the day after an accident, but it doesn't mean that they won't fly on that airline. I know this from personal experience. On July 19, 1989, a United DC-10 crashed at Sioux City, Iowa, an event that was heavily covered by the media. On July 20, 1989, I had to get on another United DC-10 and fly across the country. Was I apprehensive? Yes. Did I worry more than on a normal flight. Most certainly. Did I think the airline or the airplane was too unsafe to fly? Apparently not, since I got on the plane and made the trip.

Getting back to the concept of safety, if one assumes that the average passenger equates a safe flight with a flight where passengers are not seriously injured or killed, then most flights would certainly fit that description. While AirSafe.com does not track events where passengers are injured but not killed, it does track those events that lead to passenger deaths that involve large jet airliners and the smaller propeller driven airliners that are commonly used for shorter airline routes in the U.S. and Europe. From the beginning of 1996 to the present, the world has averaged about 14 of these events per year, which translates into a fatal event rate of less than one fatal event per million flights of these kinds of aircraft.

It is easy to say that a rate of fatal events that is less than one per million flights is safe and to leave it at that, but it makes more sense to look at the events more closely. In reviewing the data, one of the things that is clear is that the fatal events are not spread evenly around the world. For example, from November 2001 to March 2006, no large jet airliner from an airline based in the U.S. or Canada has been involved in a fatal event anywhere in the world. Also, no large jet airliner from any airline flying to or from Canada or the U.S. has been involved in a fatal event during that same time. This is a remarkable observation when one considers that more than half of all jet airliner flights involve airlines from the U.S. and Canada and airline operations to and from the U.S. and Canada.

Looking at the worldwide fatal event statistics, the following are associated with a higher risk of a fatal event:

- In events involving fatalities, smaller propeller driven aircraft have a higher percentage of passenger fatalities than larger jet aircraft
- Aircraft from smaller airline fleets are more likely to be involved in a fatal event
- Aircraft from airlines based in industrialized countries have a lower rate of fatal events
- Flights in areas with a highly developed aviation infrastructure (comprehensive air traffic control systems, instrument landing systems on runways, etc.) are less likely to be involved in a fatal event.

Even insights like these are not enough for some people. Often, passengers want to know what airlines have had not fatal events. In fact, there are over 500 airlines around the world, and most of them have never had a fatal passenger event. Most of the airlines have rather small fleets and have not been in existence for many years, so unlike major airlines with hundreds of aircraft and thousands of flights per day, the exposure to fatal events is comparatively low. Rather than listing hundreds of these airlines, the following listing is limited to larger airlines that have operated continuously since 1985 without a single fatal passenger event.

### **Largest Airlines with No Fatal Events Since 1985**

Among the largest airlines, there are only four without any fatal passenger events since 1985:

America West  
Southwest  
Virgin Atlantic  
Qantas

Incidentally, the airline with by far the greatest number of flights during this period is Southwest Airlines of the United States. In addition to these four airlines, there are hundreds of smaller airlines that have never had any fatal passenger events. Several dozen of these airlines from every region of the world are listed on AirSafe.com. For a more comprehensive list, visit AirSafe.com at <http://www.airsafe.com/events/nofatals.htm>.

### **What Does It All Mean?**

So now that you have an idea of what airlines have had no fatal events, what does it all mean for the average passenger? In my view, not much. Flying on an airliner, no matter where you are in the world, is a very low risk activity. In the industrialized countries where most airline flights occur, the risk is extremely low. When things do happen, they are usually due to not one problem, but the interaction of several problems. In many cases, these are random problems that can happen to any airline, even one without fatal events since 1985. The bottom line is that flights on any airline, even one without a record of fatal events, carries some risk and the fact that an airline does not have a fatal event in its past will not guarantee that it will never have one in the future.

The AirSafe.com Foundation is a nonprofit educational charity that provides critical information about issues of aviation safety and aviation security. The president of the Foundation, Dr. Todd Curtis, a noted aviation safety expert and author of the 2000 book “Understanding Aviation Safety Data,” first launched the web site AirSafe.com in 1996. The Foundation also produces the podcast The Conversation at AirSafe.com and the latest podcast concerning this subject is now available on the Foundation’s web site at <http://podcast.airsafe.org/>. A detailed listing of the banned airlines is also available from the AirSafe.com Foundation web site at [http://www.airsafe.org/podcasts/eu\\_blacklist.pdf](http://www.airsafe.org/podcasts/eu_blacklist.pdf).

For information: <http://www.AirSafe.com> or

Contact: [tcurtis@airsafe.com](mailto:tcurtis@airsafe.com)

Phone: 206-300-8727

###