AVIATION'S MR CONTROVERSIAL VISITS SYDNEY

News / Personalities

Akbar Al Baker is very controversial figure in aviation. Don't take *Australian Aviation* 's word of it, that's the opinion of none other than the man himself.

Introduced as "His Excellency", Al Baker fronted journalists and other invited guests at a swanky Sydney hotel on Thursday to talk up the start of Qatar's new daily service to Sydney, which touched down for the first time on Wednesday evening.

Al Baker had those in attendance prepared for fireworks when he declared at the start of the media conference, which began more than half an hour late: "I know that my airline is always creating a lot of hype wherever we go and I am sure you also know that I am a very controversial figure in the aviation industry."

What followed was an hour where Al Baker had yet another dig at Delta Air Lines over the airline's efforts to wind back the open skies agreement between the US and Qatar, chided a questioner for suggesting the oneworld alliance member had "relatively low brand awareness" in Sydney and blasted manufacturer Pratt and Whitney over the engine issues that forced Qatar to refuse acceptance of the Airbus A320NEO.

The Qatar chief executive also called on the International Air Transport Association (IATA), where he is a member of the Board of Governors, to do more to help locate missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH 370 and defended the handling of a runway overrun incident at Miami Airport in 2015 when a Qatar aircraft struck approach lights on takeoff, despite the pilot of the flight now no longer

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being with the airline.

“This runway overrun happens very often in airports,” Al Baker said.

“Rest assured that it will be the last time that Qatar Airways aircraft overrun.”

Asked why the pilots were no longer working at Qatar, Al Baker said: “In Qatar Airways we will not accept any kind of lapses by pilots because they have hundreds of passengers to whom they should never risk.”

“He was not asked to leave because he did anything by putting passengers at risk but what he did was he violated the company regulations on takeoff distance required by an aircraft, especially with the weight he was carrying on that aircraft.

“This is not particular to Qatar Airways. He would have been asked to leave post investigation in any other airline he would be working for, including I am sure at Qantas.”

But perhaps his most passionate comments were in response to a question about Qatari culture.

Australian trade unions have been protesting against the airline over its treatment of women and were outside the hotel where the media conference was being held. Unions also planned to hold another demonstration ahead of a Qatar function Al Baker is hosting on Thursday night in Sydney featuring invited guests, politicians, celebrities and a performance from Kylie Minogue.

Al Baker said Qatar the country was “conservative, but at the same time modern”.

“In my country you can mix with men, you can swim in the same swimming pool, you can wear modern clothes – mini skirts – and also my country is not dry,” Al Baker said in response to a question.

“But at the same time like I have to respect traditions of Australia when I am in Australia, we also expect Westerners to come to my country also to respect the Islamic traditions of my country.

“Women have equal rights as men under the constitution of my country.

“I think that giving negative projections or negative reflections by certain trade unions that are not allowed in my country does not mean Qatar does not give equal rights to women.”

And although the MC, television personality Sally Obermeder, had started to wind up proceedings towards the end of the event, Al Baker intervened, saying he was happy to take questions until all had been asked.

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Qatar Airways chief executive Akbar Al Baker speaking at a media conference in Sydney. (Jordan Chong)

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