

BRITISH AIRWAYS PILOT'S EYE DAMAGED BY "MILITARY" LASER SHONE INTO COCKPIT AT HEATHROW

News / Airlines



A British Airways pilot has reportedly been left with significant damage to his eyesight after a "military-strength" laser was shone into the cockpit of his plane landing at Heathrow, in what appears to be the most serious laser attack to date in the UK.

The pilot suffered a burned retina in his right eye and has not worked since, according to the head of the British Airline Pilots' Association (Balpa).

The incident has escalated concerns over the problem of laser attacks. Balpa claims that one in two pilots has been in a plane targeted with lasers in the last 12 months.

The unnamed BA pilot was in the co-pilot's seat as the plane was landing at the London airport in the spring, and was later treated for eye injuries at a hospital in Sheffield, Balpa's general secretary, Jim McAuslan, said.

British Airways said it was investigating the claims: "The safety of our crew and our customers is always our main concern. We urge our pilots to report such incidents so we can make the authorities aware."

McAuslan said the incident showed the dangers that pilots now faced from lasers, which have

become easy to buy on the internet. He said that one tenement block in Glasgow was now known as "laser block" to pilots and police from the number of planes targeted from there while landing at the city's airport.

Less severe incidents have often been ascribed to children or youthful delinquency. McAuslan said the "kids' ones" were not powerful enough to cause physical harm, but he said lasers used in weaponry had now become available on the black market.

He said: "We're very concerned about it. When something as strong as this comes on the scene it starts to worry us."

According to figures compiled by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), the number of reports of laser incidents in the UK has remained relatively constant at about four to five a day on average over the last four years.

But McAuslan said that in a poll conducted for Balpa, half of all the pilots in his union had reported a laser attack in the last 12 months, and warned that even weaker lasers could have serious consequences if pilots were distracted by the beams when landing planes: "It's a critical point in flight, you have to have complete concentration. When it comes into the flight deck, it bounces around the walls of the cockpit."

A spokesperson for Balpa added: "Lasers are one of the growing threats to flight safety faced by pilots along with fatigue, weakening regulation and security."

"We are also aware of concern around the ease of access to lasers, the increasing power of the technology and the potential they have to cause injury."

More than 400 incidents were reported in the UK in the first six months of this year, according to the CAA, with the highest number of incidents around Heathrow - although in proportion to air traffic, regional airports including Birmingham, Leeds Bradford, Newcastle and East Midlands have a far higher frequency.

In the U.S., the Federal Aviation Administration said the number of incidents had grown steadily since it started collating information on laser attacks in 2005. More than 3,700 incidents have been reported in the U.S. this year.

The FBI has released public information films to warn about the effects of laser pointers, explaining how beams can blind pilots at night, with their effects intensified as light is dispersed by the cockpit windows. A Californian man was sentenced to 14 years in prison in March this year for pointing a laser at a police helicopter.

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