

'Zombie gas' plane threat

Lethal fumes are being blamed for a series of near disasters in the skies

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A toxic gas that seeps into aeroplanes knocking out pilots and turning passengers into 'zombies' is being blamed for a series of mysterious incidents that aviation experts fear could lead to a disaster.

The potentially lethal chemical, which is used in aircraft engine oil, is being blamed for a number of mishaps. The Observer has learnt that in one case, on 12 November, an unidentified gas almost caused a catastrophe on a British Aerospace passenger aircraft flying over Sweden. On that occasion pilots had to break out oxygen masks to stop themselves falling unconscious.

On the first of a three-leg round trip, the cabin attendants felt strange, experiencing incredible pressure. One described the experience as being like a 'moonwalk'.

On the second leg, the discomfort returned and this time the two pilots experienced it too. On the third leg, to Malmo Airport, the cabin manager realised there was something seriously wrong. Many of the passengers had fallen asleep, an unusual occurrence on a Friday afternoon commuter flight. She went into the cockpit and found both pilots wearing oxygen masks.

In his report the captain said: 'We broke out the oxygen masks. From the onset of the feeling of sickness, I very rapidly became worse and worse, feeling dizzy and groggy despite the oxygen.'

The chairman of the Swedish Board of Accident Investigation told The Observer that the incident was being treated as 'extremely serious'. He said: 'The crew was affected by something in the air, but we don't know what. When the plane landed some passengers were like zombies and could not be woken. Fortunately the plane was at 2,500m. Had it been much lower we would have a major disaster on our hands.'

Research in the US has found that air in planes can carry toxins from leaking oil seals. The University of British Columbia found that filters of a BAe 146 - the model involved in the Swedish incident - had its filters overloaded, allowing poisonous fumes to enter the cabin.

Hundreds of cabin staff in America, Australia and Canada have complained about symptoms such as feeling disorientated, blurred vision and breathing difficulties. A number of US cabin staff are taking Alaskan Airlines to court over illnesses which have prevented some of them from working again.

A handful of pilots in Britain have also complained about symptoms similar to those found in workers such as farmers who have complained of organophosphate poisoning.

One British pilot who does not wish to be named has been off work for several months after a suspected case of OP poisoning. He says that at first he felt like he had a bad dose of the flu.

OPs in sheep dip are blamed for causing neurological problems; some in the military believe these chemicals are behind Gulf War Syndrome.

Paul Tyler MP, chairman of the All Party Organo-Phosphates group, is demanding a review of the use of engine oil containing these potentially toxic chemicals.

He said: 'We have known for some time that these potentially lethal chemicals are used as lubricants in aircraft engines. After this very disturbing report from Sweden, we want assurances.'

These lubricants were originally intended only for helicopter engines, operating at relatively low altitudes and therefore without air pressure problems.

The British pilots' union, Balpa, is also demanding an inquiry into the chemicals. Bruce D'Ancey, assistant general secretary of Balpa, said: 'There needs to be an inquiry into whether there are problems in aviation. This new incident in Sweden certainly suggests this should be carried out with some urgency.'

Aviation experts believe the problem is due to a chemical called tricresyl phosphate which is used in oil to prevent engine wear.

British Aerospace has issued guidance to all airlines that use its 146 planes. A spokesman for the company said: 'We are telling our operators what has happened and issuing them with safety instructions. This is a standard measure.'

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