

Brussels, 5 October 2006

Aviation security: EU acts against liquid explosives

Questions and answers

IMPACT ON AIRPORTS AND PASSENGERS

1. Will the new rules cause problems at airports?

Last August, the British and American authorities had to act instantly to meet a threat that was both unexpected and very serious. So they naturally did the maximum. We now have had time to consider carefully the operational effects of restrictions on liquids and how to minimise them. Our regulation even contains measures to help screeners at airports work quickly and effectively.

Also, national authorities, airports and airlines will have time to prepare for the new rules. We know that they have already begun planning for them. And they will have about a month from now to do everything needed as the regulation is expected to come early in November.

They will also have time to inform passengers well in advance. And the Commission will help the Member States and the associations representing airlines and airports in their campaigns to launch information campaigns before the regulation comes into force.

All this should minimise the effects of the new rules on operations at airports and minimise delays for passengers. But this does not mean that there will be no hold-ups at all. We want to keep them to the minimum but there may still be some price to pay for better security.

COVERAGE OF NEW REGULATION

2. To which flights does the new regulation apply?

Our aim is to protect all flights leaving from airports in the EU, whatever their destination. The explosives are easy to make and use and it is impossible to predict where terrorists may strike next. Any flight leaving the EU is a potential target and should be protected.

So the new regulation applies to all flights departing from airports in the EU, whatever their destination and whatever the nationality of the airline. And it covers passengers transferring from one flight to another at an airport in the Union, but makes certain exemptions for passengers whose first flight begins at an airport in the EU (see question 16).

LIQUIDS COVERED

3. What does “liquid” imply?

The regulation defines liquids widely because so many different types could be used as ingredients of explosives. Some things are evidently liquids, like drinks or perfume. Others are less obviously liquid, like covers gels, pastes, lotions, mixtures of liquids and solids and the contents of aerosols. Some examples are toothpaste, hair gel, face cream, hair gel, liquid soaps, deodorants and shaving foam.

Why does the new regulation apply to all of these? It is because evidence shows that explosives can be produced as pure liquids or as semi-liquid gels, so they can be presented in various forms.

4. Why cover all liquids?

Present-day machines cannot distinguish one liquid from another sufficiently quickly to be used for screening at airports. That is why our new regulation applies to all liquids except in quantities too small to make effective bombs.

5. Even water?

Even water is covered because it is difficult to distinguish from other liquids sufficiently quickly and surely at screening points. But this does not mean passengers will go thirsty. They can buy drinks in the restricted areas of airports after the screening points or on-board aircraft.

QUANTITIES PERMITTED

6. Why quantities are harmless? What exemption is made for small quantities?

The Commission has consulted experts on explosives and their advice is that it is not possible to make explosives that could destroy an aircraft with small quantities. The limit of 100 millilitres (1/10 litre) per container in the regulation is based on their advice.

7. Could not a terrorist carry many small containers?

This is certainly a risk. A terrorist could mix together the contents of a number of small containers and get enough to make an effective bomb. So we have to limit not only the size of individual containers, but also the number that any passenger can take past screening points.

Our technical advice is that a total volume of around 500 millilitres (1/2 litre) would still be safe. However, it would be quite impractical to ask screeners to add together the capacities of dozens of small containers: 30 millilitres here, 55 there and so on. This would delay flights for hours and drive screeners mad. So we adopted another solution.

By experiment the Americans have found that, if you pack a number of containers of around 100 millilitres into a plastic bag of one litre capacity, measured their capacities and added them up, the total quantity of liquids was in the range of 500 millilitres. And screeners can easily check such bags if they are transparent. Hence this measure.

8. What kind of plastic bag?

The regulation does not lay down a precise model that must be used. That would be gross over-regulation. Passengers can use the model they choose, as long as it meets the requirements of the regulation: the bag must be transparent, re-sealable and of a capacity not exceeding one litre.

One easily available type is the freezer bag, which is sold in most supermarkets. They cost around 10 cents a bag.

9. Why “re-sealable” bags?

The regulation specifies “re-sealable” bags for simple practical reasons. On the one hand, passengers must be able to close their bags firmly so that things do not fall out, a great inconvenience particularly for people travelling. On the other, screeners must be able to open bags to check the contents. Hence the need for re-sealable bags.

10. What if a passenger arrives at an airport without one?

We are discussing with the airport and airline associations how to make sure that bags are available at airports, particularly in the early days before passengers get used to the new rules. After a short time it is certain that shops will stock them, both in and outside airports.

MEDICINES AND DIETARY REQUIREMENTS

11. What about passengers that need medicines or special foods in liquid form?

The new regulation allows some exemptions from the restrictions for medicines and for dietary requirements in liquid form, for example baby-food or food for people on special diets. Passengers are allowed to bring these past the screening points in the quantities that they need during their trip.

But as a safeguard, in case of doubt a screener may request a passenger to demonstrate that what he or she is carrying is really medicine or a special food, and not something less innocent

PURCHASES AT AIRPORT SHOPS

12. Will passengers still be able to buy liquids at airport shops?

We do not want to deprive passengers of the opportunity to shop at airports nor to ruin this industry. On the other hand, The Commission cannot compromise on security. So our regulation exempts liquids bought from airport shops from the restrictions, but with certain precautions.

This means that passengers would still be able to buy at airport shops quantities of liquids additional to the contents of the 100milliter containers (see questions 6 and 7) and take them on-board the aircraft.

13. Are airport shops secure?

The supply of goods to shops beyond the point where boarding passes are checked is tightly controlled, among other things to prevent theft. It would be almost impossible for a terrorist to get components of explosives onto the shelves of these shops and then to pick them up and carry them on-board an aircraft.

14. Could not someone tamper with liquids after purchase?

There is risk of someone interfering with a passenger's purchases at an airport shop. For example a terrorist might substitute an explosives component for a bottle of whisky or of perfume.

The risk is serious in the case of shops located beyond the point where boarding passes are checked but before the screening points, because neither passengers nor airport staff are screened before they enter these areas.

For that reason, the regulation says that liquids bought in these shops must be packed in special bags that show whether they have been tampered with. For example, bags that tear or rip if you try to open the seal; "tamper-evident" is the technical term. These shops will pack liquids in the special bags for their customers. Passengers will be obliged to leave their purchases in the tamper-proof bags until they have completed their journey.

N.B. These bags are different from those of one litre capacity, whose purpose is to limit the quantity of liquids carried in from the land side of an airport.

15. What about shops after the screening points?

Passengers can buy liquids freely at shops inside the security restricted area after the screening points, without any special precautions. This is because passengers and staff working at the airport have been screened before entering the restricted area. However, these shops are likely to sell their goods in tamper-proof bags in order to make things easier for transfer passengers.

16. What about transfer passengers?

What happens when passengers buy liquids at an airport, carry them on their first flight and then transfer to a second flight at an airport in the EU? This depends on whether the first flight originates at an airport in the EU or at one in a third country.

If the first flight begins at an airport in the EU, passengers will only be carrying liquids in conformity with the regulation. So they are allowed to take the liquids on-board their second flight, so long as they are packed in tamper-evident bags (see question 14).

But, if the first flight originates in third country that does not follow EU security rules, there is no guarantee that liquids have been controlled and are secure. So passengers transferring from such a flight at an EU airport would not be allowed to take them on their second flight.

17. What about purchases on-board aircraft?

If the first flight is operated by a Community airline, passengers are allowed to take such liquids on their second flight, so long as they are packed in tamper-evident bags (see question 14). This is because the carrier is subject to EU rules on security and is controlled by the authorities of a Member State.

But, if the first flight is operated by an airline of a third country, passengers are not permitted to take liquids bought during that flight on their second flight.

HELPING SCREENERS

18. What does the regulation do to help maintain the speed and quality of screening?

A consequence of the new rules is that screeners have to search for liquids in addition to other prohibited articles, such as guns and knives. This makes their work more difficult and puts them under greater pressure. So something must be done to maintain the quality and speed of screening.

It has been found that screening is more effective and goes more quickly if passengers remove their jackets and coats so that they are X-rayed rather than walking through metal detectors wearing them. Equally, screeners can X-ray cabin bags more efficiently if large, dense items that could hide prohibited articles are removed.

So the new regulation requires that passengers take off their jackets and coats and remove laptop computers and other large electrical items from the cabin baggage before screening. This is often done already. What the regulation does is to make good practice obligatory.

19. Does the regulation limit the size of cabin baggage?

Experience shows that it is more difficult to X-ray a thick bag than a thin one. This is because the additional layers of objects create more complex images and because one object can hide another. So to maintain the efficiency of screening, the new regulation will limit the size of cabin baggage to that recommended by the International Air Transport Association, after a transitional period of six months.

For most passengers this will make little difference because their cabin baggage is smaller than the IATA recommendation. But some passengers will have to use smaller bags after the transitional period of six months and those that carry huge bags on board aircraft, the size of small refrigerators, will no longer be allowed to do so. This should make life easier for their fellow passengers.

20. Can airlines set lower limits?

The regulation sets a legal limit to the size of cabin baggage; it is the maximum allowed legally. If airlines wish to set lower limits for operational reasons, they can do so but that is their decision.

21. What about oversize bags?

Passengers sometimes wish to carry over-size bags in the cabin because they contain valuable or fragile items, like musical instruments. Exceptions can be granted for them. Passengers must present them for approval at check-in and for examination at the screening point.

THIRD COUNTRIES

22. Which rules apply to flights to the United States?

For the last six weeks, strict rules on liquids have been applied to flights bound for the USA. The new rules adopted by the Commission are very close to the US ones. From our contacts with the Transport Security Administration, we have good reason to expect that the administration will consider them equivalent to US rules, so that only one set of rules would apply to flights from the EU to the USA.

23. What about flights from third countries to the European Union

Some third countries, such as the United States and Canada, have already adopted similar restrictions on liquids. A number of European states outside the Union will align their rules on the EU regulation, as they have with other security measures (members of the European Economic Area and of the European Civil Aviation Conference)

We hope that other countries will follow as they become aware of the risks, although this will take time. We also hope that the International Civil Aviation Organisation will also take steps in due course.