

Mauritanian hijacker gets in hot water

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SANTA CRUZ DE TENERIFE, Canary Islands - A fast-thinking pilot with passengers in cahoots fooled a hijacker by braking hard upon landing, then accelerating to knock the man down. When he fell, flight attendants threw boiling water in his face, and about 10 people pounced on him, Spanish officials said Friday.

The Air Mauritania Boeing 737 carrying 71 passengers and a crew of eight was hijacked by a lone gunman brandishing two pistols Thursday evening shortly after it took off from Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, for Gran Canaria, one of Spain's Canary Islands, with a planned stopover in Nouadhibou in northern Mauritania.

The hijacking alarmed Spanish officials because a trial of 29 people accused in the Madrid terrorist bombings of 2004 had begun the same day in Madrid. But the man's motives were not terrorism; he wanted the plane to fly to France so he could request political asylum, said Mohamed Ould Mohamed Cheikh, Mauritania's top police official.

"We were afraid. We thought it was people from al-Qaida or the Algerian GSPC who were going to cut our throats," said Aicha Mint Sidi, a 45-year-old woman who was on the plane. The GSPC is a Muslim extremist group.

"I trembled during and after the hijacking. I thought the plane was going to blow up any minute, either in mid-air or on landing," said another passenger, Dahi Ould Ali, 52. Both spoke after returning to Nouakchott.

The hijacker has been identified as Mohamed Abderraman, a 32-year-old Mauritanian, said an official with the Spanish Interior Ministry office on Tenerife, another of the islands in the Atlantic archipelago. He spoke under ground rules barring publication of his name. Mauritania has said the hijacker was a Moroccan from the Western Sahara.

The hijacker ordered the pilot to fly to France, but the crew told him there was not enough fuel. And Morocco denied a request to land in the city of Djala in the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, so the pilot headed for Las Palmas in Gran Canaria, the original destination.

Along the way, speaking to the hijacker, the pilot realized the man did not speak French. So he used the plane's public address system to warn the passengers in French of the ploy he was going to try: brake hard upon landing, then speed up abruptly. The idea was to catch the hijacker off balance, and have crew members and men sitting in the front rows of the plane jump him, the Spanish official said.

The pilot also warned women and children to move to the back of the plane in preparation for the subterfuge, the official said.

It worked. The man was standing in the middle aisle when the pilot carried out his maneuver, and he fell to the floor, dropping one of his two 7 mm pistols. Flight attendants then threw boiling water from a coffee machine in his face and at his chest, and some 10 people jumped on the man and beat him, the Spanish official said.

Around 20 people were slightly injured when the plane braked suddenly, the official said.

The hijacker was arrested by Spanish police who boarded the plane after it landed at Gando airport, outside Las Palmas.

Air Mauritania identified the heroic pilot as Ahmedou Mohamed Lemine, a 20-year-veteran of the company.