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UPS 747 Crash Highlights Lithium Battery Danger

2010 mishap traced to cargo hold fire.

By Stephen Pope
July 25, 2013



UPS 747 Dubai Crash

** Remains of the UPS Boeing 747 cargo plane that crashed in 2010. (Photo credit: EPA)**

Accident investigators have traced a fire that destroyed a UPS Boeing 747 in the United Arab Emirates in 2010 to the lithium batteries being carried in the cargo hold. Unless something is done to prevent similar disasters, the FAA now says such crashes are all but inevitable in the future.

A 322-page report issued by the UAE's General Civil Aviation

Authority determined that heat from the fire disabled the crew's oxygen system and that smoke filled the cockpit within three minutes of the first warning, obscuring the pilots' view. Both crew members were killed when the 747-44AF crashed on Sept. 3, 2010, near Dubai.

Investigators say the crash highlights the risks posed by lithium batteries, which are prone to overheating leading to intense fires. The NTSB held a two-day meeting in April to explore the dangers of these types of batteries. In a **recent report issued by the FAA in conjunction with Transport Canada**, the agencies predicted there will be an average of six cargo plane crashes between now and 2021, with four of them likely to be caused by battery fires.

Lithium backup batteries in the Boeing 787 Dreamliner overheated aboard two airplanes and prompted the **FAA to ground the fleet** for months earlier this year. Investigators in the UK, meanwhile, traced a fire this month in an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 787 at London Heathrow International Airport to the lithium batteries in the airplane's emergency locator transmitters.

The FAA has banned lithium batteries as cargo on passenger airplanes, but they are still allowed on cargo airplanes that do not carry passengers.

In the wake of the Dubai 747 crash, UPS has started using fireproof cargo containers as well as cockpit smoke hoods and oxygen masks that are easier to don. The company said it has ordered more than 1,800 of the fiber-reinforced shipping containers, designed to withstand fires for up to four hours.

The crew in Dubai reported the fire about 22 minutes into the flight. They tried to turn back to the airport to land, but smoke obscured their view outside and of the instruments. The captain's oxygen supply also stopped working at some point. The 747 flew past the airport and crashed minutes later.

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