

6 Section 1 Chicago Tribune, Thursday, June 29, 1989

Nation/world

On this airline, standees are the lucky ones

By Howard Witt
Chicago Tribune

KABUL, Afghanistan—The last passenger loaded on board Ariana Afghan Airlines Flight 956 was stretched out in a coffin.

This was a fortunate thing for the dead man or woman—no one seemed to know the deceased's identity—because the 10 passengers who had boarded immediately before were forced to make the 90-minute trip standing in the plane's aisle.

But those 10 may have been luckier than the 56 who had rushed to board before them and grab the plane's seats. The standees were closer to the ceiling, where a scant few air vents provided just enough wisps of ventilation to keep everyone barely conscious in the 100-degree heat of the cabin.

The formal name of Afghanistan's national airline is Ariana. But veteran travelers know it by another name: *Inshallah*. That's Arabic for "God willing." As in, "The plane will take off today, *inshallah*," or, "We will have enough fuel to get to Kabul, *inshallah*" — both actual quotations from Ariana employees.

Take for example a trip from Mazar-i-Sharif, a city some 200 miles northwest of Kabul. The Ariana office is on the second floor of a garbage-strewn building that looks as if it might have been condemned a decade ago. The place is not hard to find—it's the only building where several hundred people are milling about in front with luggage, boxes, cooking utensils, sacks of flour, animal cages and, occasionally, a coffin.

Inside, the pilots for that day's flight will be huddled around a two-way radio, awaiting the daily weather report from Kabul.

The weather report comes on at precisely 8:30 a.m. It's better not to ask why, if the weather report comes on at 8:30 a.m., you were told by an Ariana agent to arrive at the office promptly at 7:30 a.m. The answer will be: "Because the weather report comes on at 8:30 a.m."

Assignment:**Mazar-i-Sharif**

If the news is good—that is, if somebody thinks a plane might come in from somewhere, sometime that day—you will be instructed to rush out to the airport, where you will be permitted to sit for hours in a sweltering, fly-infested waiting room.

It is never certain, of course, that a plane will actually show up. There are two reasons for this. First, Ariana planes generally take on only enough fuel to get them to the nearest airport in the general direction of their final destination. This, it is explained, is because of war-induced fuel shortages.

Second, Ariana pilots do not seem to like to fly more than once a day, usually in the afternoon when it is hottest. Nighttime flights are out of the question—none of Afghanistan's airports can handle instrument landings.

If, *inshallah*, a plane does arrive, the next crucial phase of the flight commences: the boarding process. This is accomplished by having everyone who wishes to fly huddle around the back of the plane, which in the case of Flight 956 was a small Soviet-made cargo turboprop converted to passenger use by the installation of 14 rows of battered seats.

There are no bothersome security screenings on Ariana's domestic flights.

Passengers merely begin handing their luggage, boxes and assorted worldly possessions to several attendants who carry everything up the rear loading ramp into the plane.

These men, it appears, are true miracle workers. There is so much stuff it seems impossible that they could fit everything inside and still leave room for the passengers.

It turns out that they have not, in fact, left much room for the passengers. The spectacular loading feat has been performed by stacking all the luggage on top of the first four rows of seats.

Within about 90 seconds, all the open seats are taken, so some of the people caught without a place to sit promptly begin dismantling the neat stacks of luggage that are occupying those 16 precious seats up front. This luggage is redistributed along the entire length of the aisle to a height of about four feet.

Finally the last 10 passengers who will have to stand find themselves comfortable niches among the luggage. The coffin is trundled aboard and wedged behind the last row of seats, and the back door snaps shut.

For the next 20 minutes, the plane does absolutely nothing. The engines do not turn, the lights do not come on and the vents circulate no air. Soon everyone in the stifling cabin falls silent, not wanting to waste precious oxygen by speaking.

A distinctive odor begins to rise from somewhere in the back of the plane—in the vicinity of the coffin.

At last, the plane groans to life, lumbers down the runway and lifts off. The lights come on and there is just enough oxygen vented to keep a match lit, whereupon nearly every man pulls out a cigarette and tucks a pinch of snuff into his lower lip.

As no spittoons have been provided, the men spit into the aisle, trying not to hit the passengers standing there. The luggage is not so fortunate.

Amazingly, the plane does finally arrive at Kabul, and there are no more dead passengers than there were when the flight began, which is to say, there is still one. He or she is unloaded first, not so much out of respect but rather because the coffin is blocking the exit of all the other passengers.