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For further information:
Captain James Shilling 901-337-7033



The Coalition of Airline Pilots Associations

Surface-to-Air Missiles a Real Threat to Commercial Aviation

WASHINGTON, D.C., June 22, 2004 – The United States urgently needs to deploy systems to protect airline passengers against terrorist attacks using surface-to-air missiles, a leading pilot spokesman told Congress today.

“The threat to civilian airliners is real and immediate,” Capt. James Shilling, security spokesman for the DC-based Coalition of Airline Pilots Associations (CAPA), advised key committee chairs in the U.S. House and Senate today. “The question is whether action will be taken before or after hundreds of people are killed in an attack.”

Defense industry publications estimate that 500,000 easily-concealed, shoulder-fired missiles – “man-portable air defense systems” or “MANPADS” in military jargon – may have fallen into the hands of terrorist organizations around the world.

Shilling described his meetings last month in London with aviation security specialists from six foreign airlines based on three continents.

“U.S. and foreign-flag airlines are all dragging their feet on MANPADS counter-measures,” Shilling said, “and the eventual result may be a global shutdown of airline operations.”

Shilling compared the passenger airlines to the infamous Edward John Smith, Captain of the Titanic. “He was warned that icebergs were in his path, but refused to slow down because he hadn’t hit one yet.”

Key members of congress and their staff gathered at an open forum organized by the Association of Old Crows, an electronic warfare trade group. Since early 2003, the AOC has urged the Bush Administration to give the “highest priority” to the installation of a “surface-to-air missile detection and deterrent system” for commercial airliners.

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) has argued that the military has already proven that on-board systems are capable of distracting or blinding heat-seeking missiles. She and others on Capitol Hill have introduced legislation to require their deployment on the entire civilian aircraft fleet. Congress has not yet scheduled hearings.

CAPA is the trade group representing the interests of more than 22,000 commercial cargo and passenger pilots nationwide. CAPA members fly for American Airlines, United Parcel Service, ABX Air, Southwest Airlines and AirTran.

“Pilots Representing Pilots”