

May 01, 2008 – Death penalty for ULD Damage

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Capital punishment for ULD damage? This may seem rather harsh even in the world's most repressive societies, but the use of this statement caught the attention of senior air cargo executives recently, putting the issue in the spotlight.

Although used purely for its shock value, senior members of the IATA cargo team at the recent World Cargo Symposium in Rome took the wake-up call and elevated the awareness of the negative impact of ULD damage high on their work agenda for 2008.

Rightly so, ULD damage through inadequate handling and storage has reached totally unacceptable levels. Airlines are spending in excess of US\$130 million a year repairing ULD damage. At the same time up to 5 per cent of the world's total ULD fleet is out of service at any point in time awaiting repair. At the same time damaged ULD are contributing to personnel injuries, damage to cargo, and damage to aircraft holds and loading systems.

This simply cannot go on, one can think of no other item of airline property where it would be so acceptable for such abuse to take place without any consequence against those responsible.

This abuse of ULD seems to have become so common that people take it for granted. ULD stacked two or three high raise no comment, the use of forklifts to move loaded ULD doesn't even raise an eyebrow, and the smashing of a ULD is treated as "just one of those things," something that happens in the line of duty, not to be taken seriously.

Requirements for the proper handling of ULD are laid out in the IATA airport handling manual, and other documents. There is no secret here, no hidden agenda, just the total unwillingness by many parties in the ULD handling chain to pay sufficient attention to industry standards.

The offenders roll

Starting at the top airports simply do not take into account the need to increase ULD storage as they add new airlines and more flights, Asia is well populated with spectacular airports, both state and privately owned, but few pay no more than lip service to providing adequate space for ULD storage.

Next in the chain, ground handling companies. Insufficient and/or substandard dollies and other ULD transport and storage infrastructure is common across the region. If one recognises that ULD, empty or full, should never be sitting on the ground, nor should be stacked, then one quickly will recognise just how few ground handling operations achieve a reasonable standard. Up next are the cargo terminals.

Again with a few notable exceptions the vast majority are still highly dependent upon the use of forklifts to move full and empty ULD around and lack sufficient storage space for loaded and empty ULD

And finally the freight forwarding community rarely has adequate facilities at off airport locations to store ULD in compliance with IATA recommended practices.

Pity the poor ULD

What chance does a ULD stand today? Very very little indeed. The average ULD needs to be repaired every seven to eight months, some last just a few days between repairs. Annual costs for keeping just a single LD3 in condition is around US\$ 350- 450. Further it's never anybody's fault, nobody comes forward to put their hand up and offer to pay – it all just happened.

Forklifts are clearly to blame for a lot of the damage but the reality is the forklift operators are the real culprits here, a forklift in the hands of a bad or angry or tired – or all three – driver can result in some very extensive ULD damage.

Asia Pacific is one of the great growth markets for cargo and yet it contains some of the worst examples of inadequate ULD handling capability, it's time for airports, airlines, ground handlers, air cargo terminals, and freight forwarders to all get their act together to stop what amounts to vandalism, and start living up to their responsibilities in regards to ULD.

Attitudes need to change

Airlines need the industry to pay attention here. With current fuel costs threatening the very viability of the airline industry it is tragic to recognise that the current attitude towards ULD is preventing further weight reduction which could save the airlines millions of dollars.

As an example of this, every B747 freighter takes off carrying 3.6 tonnes of air cargo pallets, with improved handling of ULD's pallet weight could probably be reduced by between 25 and 50 per cent taking up to 1.8 tonnes off every B747 freighter flight. Yet ridiculously, this remains a totally elusive dream under the current circumstances, simply because ULD are daily subjected to abusive treatment.

You have been warned, capital punishment for ULD damage may not be with us yet, or in the immediate future, if indeed ever, but most certainly the negative effects of the current abusive environment are with us now and need to stop immediately.