

Airspace violations continue

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pilots have flown through the prohibited airspace protecting the White House at least 94 times over the past decade, illustrating the challenges of thwarting a terrorist airstrike on the nation's capital.

Even with military jets patrolling the skies, four commercial airliners and a medical helicopter have crossed into Washington's no-fly zone since the Sept. 11 suicide hijackings, Federal Aviation Administration officials say. The latest was on Monday.

In most cases, pilots who violated the airspace protecting the White House, vice presidential mansion and Capitol have gotten penalties less severe than a parking ticket, an Associated Press review of FAA enforcement records found.

Just a month before the September hijackings, a Mesa Airlines flight strayed into prohibited airspace. By November, the matter was closed with a warning letter to the pilot, common for most cases.

Security experts say violations of the Washington air-

space highlight a key reality in the fight against terrorism. Planes that veer into the zone can crash into government installations within seconds.

"Practically speaking, by the time a violation is discovered, it is too late to do anything to prevent a crash into the White House," former FAA security chief Billie H. Vincent said.

FAA Deputy Administrator Monte R. Belger said Thursday the agency recognizes there's little time to react once planes penetrate the safety zone and so the government has imposed

numerous other precautions to ensure planes with the don't get close.

"The restricted area of the last line of defense," Belger said. "The additional the-ground security procedures and in-flight protocols in place give us a much level of confidence."

Borders have been tight pilots, flight crews and passengers are screened to weed out terrorists, and planes approaching Reagan National Airport have been turned since Sept. 11 because they can't complete the verification process, officials said.

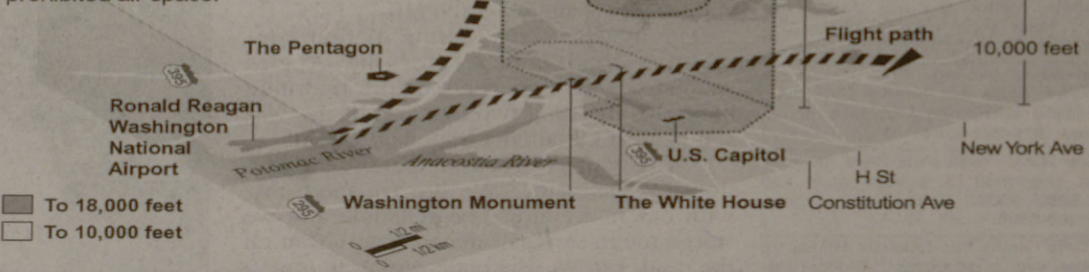
Planes that violate the prohibited zone are quickly by the flight tower to course, and the Secret Service alerted. Nearly all pilots comply immediately, officials said.

Military planes that penetrate the capital skies are permitted to force such planes to land as a last resort, shoot down if pilots don't respond.

None of the five planes that flew into the protected zone since Sept. 11 have required such action, officials said.

Boundaries in the sky

Over the last decade, pilots have violated prohibited airspace nearly 100 times over Washington, D.C., and in most cases received penalties less severe than a parking ticket. For security reasons, pilots leaving Washington National Airport make a steep turn to the west or east to avoid prohibited air space.



SOURCES: Associated Press; Federal Aviation Administration; ESRI; GDT

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Villagers kidnap American, nine others in Nigeria

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — Villagers stormed a boat servicing a drilling rig off Nigeria's southern coast, taking hostage the 10 international and Nigerian oil workers aboard, Shell Oil said Thursday.

The 10 workers — one American, four Ghanaians, one Filipino and four Nigerians — were captured Tuesday by 40 young men from the village of Amatu, Bayelsa state, an International spokesman James Herbert said in London.

The hostage-takers demanded employment, oil contracts and other help from Shell in return for the workers' safe release, Herbert said.

The captives, whose identities were not disclosed, are employed by a company contracted to Shell, Tindex Marine, Herbert said. Telephone calls to a Tindex Marine representative in Nigeria were not answered.

The youths, ethnic Ijaws, were apparently angered by the destruction of several boats during an armed standoff in January between Nigerian security forces and Ijaw villagers who had been captured another Shell boat, local newspapers reported Thursday, citing an official with Shell's Nigeria subsidiary.

Herbert could not immediately confirm the account of Nigerian officials, who were not available for comment.

On Wednesday evening when Shell officials last heard about the captives, the hostages were all in good health and had not been harmed, he said.

State government officials visited Amatu on Wednesday and held talks with the village chief and youths aimed at ending the impasse. A follow-up meeting between the hostage-takers and officials was planned for next week.

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