

Airbus promotes "controversial" A350 in BD, found flawed by global airlines

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Dhaka : With the hopes of expanding its business in South Asia starting with Bangladesh, Airbus held an exhibition at Dhaka Airport to demonstrate its wide-body new generation aircraft A350 to the country's airline officials, aviation authorities and media personnel on March 20. However, while the European plane-manufacturing giant Airbus is out on the hunt for more A350 customers, more and more global airlines as well as associations are coming up with complaints of a surface degradation issue of the aircraft.

The surface degradation issue with the A350, which raises concerns over the aircraft's airworthiness, began in August 2021 when one of the leading global airlines Qatar Airways grounded 13 A350s jet of this variant in its fleet. Qatar Airways even released footages detailing the paint-degradation of the aircraft.

In one of those video footages, the airline mentioned these defects are not superficial. One of the defects causes the aircraft's lightning protection system to be exposed and damaged, another defect leaves the underlying composite structure exposed to moisture and ultraviolet light, and other defects include cracking in the composite and damage around a high percentage of rivets on the aircraft fuselage. Over the grounded A350s in the fleet of Qatar Airways, the airline sued Airbus for USD 600 million in compensation.

On January 20, 2022, Qatar Airways issued a press statement that mentioned, through the legal proceedings against Airbus in the Technology and Construction division of the High Court in England, the airline sought an expedited hearing of a preliminary issue to address serious and legitimate safety concerns over the surface degradation issue adversely impacting its Airbus A350 fleet, which has resulted in the grounding of 21 Airbus A350s so far.

"Qatar Airways strongly believe that Airbus must undertake a thorough investigation of this condition to conclusively establish its full root cause in order to establish whether any proposed repair solution will rectify the underlying condition and ensure no risk to the continued airworthiness of the aircraft," said Qatar Airways in the press statement, adding, "Airbus has responded by seeking to cancel an entirely separate contract for the delivery of 50 A321 Neo aircraft."

However, the dispute between these two aviation giants over paint and surface flaws on A350 jets stretched beyond the Gulf, with at least five other airlines and an association raising concerns since this high-tech model of Airbus entered service.

According to reports, Finnair, which operates in the colder north, raised paint concerns as early as 2016, and reported in October 2019 that damage had spread below to the anti-lightning mesh.

Cathay Pacific, Etihad Airways, Lufthansa, Air France and Air Caraibes also complained of the paint damage.

The International Airlines Group (IAG), which owns British Airways and Iberia, also joined the list by reporting surface paint issues with its Airbus A350 airplanes.

On the other hand, as per reports, Airbus said there is no risk to the A350's safety. This was also reflected by the other airlines and IAG, which have not grounded any jets so far while considering the issue as cosmetic.

Reports mentioned IAG Chief Executive Luis Gallego saying, while some surface degradation issues have risen, Europe's safety aviation regulator EASA does not feel these are severe enough to affect the airworthiness of the planes.

Reports further said, Finnair, Cathay Pacific and Lufthansa too confirmed some of their A350s had suffered what they described as cosmetic damage. Air Caraibes said it and sister airline French Bee had seen "no major paint problems," and especially none regarding safety. Air France said its own A350s had operated normally since it began flying them in 2021.

On the contrary, Qatar Airways continues to urge Airbus to undertake a satisfactory root cause analysis into the cause of the defects, as it is required to do. In the meantime, the airline will continue to robustly defend its position in the legal proceedings against Airbus, Qatar Airways added in its press statement.

Nevertheless, the plane-maker said, according to reports, they are working to fix the issue. Airbus said it had found a root cause. However, reports cited two affected airlines saying they had not been notified of any yet.

Meanwhile, Airbus confirmed, they did "terminate the contract for 50 A321s with Qatar Airways" in accordance with their rights."

A350 demonstration in BD

While the dispute by Qatar Airways and Airbus continues regarding the surface paint issue of A350s, the latter sent a 'demonstration model' out on tour on March 18 to penetrate markets like Bangladesh and India in South Asia with the hopes of convincing the airlines of the respective countries to choose its 'controversial' flagship wide-body A350 as their next high-capacity long-haul aircraft.

On March 20, the European aeroplane manufacturer, organised a demonstration of its A350 aircraft at Hazrat Shahjalal International airport in the capital.

A high-level team of the Bangladesh government and airline officials including the

Post and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali, Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh Chairman Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman, and Biman Bangladesh Airlines Managing Director and CEO Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal attended the exhibition and flew in the sky on the A350F aircraft.

From Airbus side, Rêmi Maillard, President of Airbus India and Managing Director of South Asia region, and other high officials of the European plane manufacturing company were also present on the occasion.

At the event, Airbus officials said, the long-range aircraft is powered by Rolls-Royce Trent XWB 97K engine, meets the latest CO2 emissions standard, adopted by the International Civil Aviation Organisation, which will come into effect after 2027.