

Libyan plane seizing ends peacefully as hijackers surrender; all passengers freed safely

23/12/2016 21:24 by admin

Malta: Hijackers who today diverted a Libyan plane carrying 118 people to the Mediterranean island of Malta have surrendered and are now in custody, Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat said.

As tense negotiations ensued, all the passengers were allowed to leave the plane within a few hours.

The hijacked Airbus A320 flight, operated by Afriqiyah Airways, was traveling from the Libyan oasis city of Sabha to Tripoli when it was diverted to Malta midmorning on Friday.

Malta state television TVM said the two hijackers on board had hand grenades and had threatened to explode them.

All flights to Malta International Airport were immediately diverted and emergency teams including negotiators were sent to the airport tarmac for what the Malta airport agency called an "unlawful interference."

An official from Afriqiyah Airways said the two hijackers expressed a willingness to release the passengers but said they would keep the pilot.

The doors of the plane opened at 1:44 p.m. and a staircase was moved over to its door before passengers began disembarking in groups.

In a series of tweets, Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat said 65 people were allowed to leave the hijacked plane, then another 44, including some crew. All were seen leaving the aircraft without hand luggage.

The company said on its Facebook page that 118 people, including 7 crew members, were on board the hijacked plane.

The spokesman for the UN-brokered government in Libya said the hijackers are two men in their twenties who are seeking political asylum in Europe. Ashraf al-Tufty told The Associated Press that the hijackers have grenades on board and negotiations were still ongoing.

Al-Tufty spoke to the Associated Press over the phone from Tripoli.

He said a Libyan lawmaker, Abdel-Salam al-Marabet was on the diverted flight.

Another Libyan lawmaker from Sabha, Youssef Kalikori, told the AP that he had been talking by phone to al-Marabet, who said the hijackers are demanding "asylum in a European country where they can establish a political party named al-Fateh that represents the old (Libyan) regime."

After many of the hostages left the plane Friday afternoon, someone, apparently a hijacker, waved the old green Libyan flag from the plane's doorway.

Libya, a sprawling oil-rich North African country, has been split between rival parliaments and governments, each backed by a loose array of militias and tribes, since its former dictator Moammar Gadhafi was ousted and killed in 2011.

Western nations view the newly-formed U.N.-brokered government as the best hope for uniting the country, but Libya's

parliament, which meets in the country's far east, has refused to accept it. Amid chaos, the Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates have gained a foothold over the past years.

Earlier this month, militias answering to the UN-brokered government seized the Islamic State group's last stronghold in the Libyan city of Sirte.

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