

## **Turkmen Official Makes Jumbo Mistake**

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President Saparmurat Niazov sacks his ministers and other senior officials so regularly that news of another dismissal is hardly news at all.

When national airline deputy chief Bayrammyrat Gurtgeldiev was dismissed on September 20, it was for the almost routine reason of "grave errors in his work". But on this occasion the president at least had a reason to be annoyed.

President Niazov had got into his presidential jumbo jet to fly home to Ashgabat after a short visit to the eastern Lebap region, when it refused even to start, let alone taxi off down the runway.

What must have made it even more vexing was that this was no tired old Soviet warhorse from the old Aeroflot fleet, but a brand-new Boeing 767. The president had hardly used the supersize plane since he got it in May this year.

When two hours of frantic work by ground staff failed to get the four jet turbines to turn over, the president had to get off and make his trip in a standard Boeing 717 liner sent out from Ashgabat. This replacement plane was supposed to be on a scheduled flight, but this being Turkmenistan, there was no problem in throwing the passengers off.

As well as Gurtgeldiev, the president got rid of Turkmenabat airport head Begmyrat Saparov, citing similar "shortcomings".

The reason why the presidential jumbo failed to move is not known, and probably never will be given the secrecy that surrounds such matters in Turkmenistan. But it does highlight the frequent delays that the average air traveller suffers at the hands of Turkmenhovayollary, the state carrier.

Although the fleet now consists mostly of Boeings rather than Tupolevs, insiders say they are not all new or well-maintained. One Boeing 717, for example, was given to the airline as a gift and has seen better days. It can only fly from Ashgabat to Turkmenabat because it will not start by itself, and only those two airports have an electric starter motor that can be attached to the plane's turbines to get them spinning.

Few passengers can afford to worry about either delays or the state of the planes they are travelling in. Getting an air ticket for a run-of-the mill internal flight can entail an overnight wait at the travel office - with no guarantee of success - and paying well over the odds in bribes to airline staff, ticket sellers or assorted middlemen.

That is, unless you are a regional governor, his deputy, or even his relative, in which case you will always be assured of a seat. Of course, if you are president you will have your own plane - assuming you can get the thing started.

**Location:** [Turkmenistan](#)

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