Air rage: How soft penalties, double standards threaten Nigeria’s aviation safety

Date: 2025-08-30

Source: https://punchng.com/air-rage-how-soft-penalties-double-standards-threaten-nigerias-aviation-safety/

Air travel relies heavily on strict discipline and zero tolerance for in-flight misconduct to ensure passenger and crew safety. However, recent incidents of air rage in Nigeria have exposed serious lapses in enforcement.  
  
In contrast to global aviation hubs, particularly in the West, where unruly passengers are swiftly met with jail terms, hefty fines, or lifetime flight bans, Nigerian authorities have largely issued what critics describe as mere “slaps on the wrist.”  
  
IBRAHIM ADAM writes that such leniency not only risks emboldening future offenders but could also erode public confidence in aviation safety and tarnish Nigeria’s global aviation safety reputation  
  
Nigeria’s aviation sector, once praised for its steadily improving safety record, has in recent months been shaken by a troubling surge in in-flight disturbances and airport security breaches.  
  
From heated altercations inside aircraft cabins to volatile confrontations on the tarmac and even violent assaults on crew members, the skies are no longer as calm or as safe as passengers expect.  
  
These incidents, which occurred in rapid succession between January and August 2025, have reignited urgent debates around aviation safety, passenger discipline, crew professionalism, and Nigeria’s capacity to uphold its International Civil Aviation Organisation safety rating.  
  
More critically, they raise difficult questions: Are aviation rules being enforced uniformly? And are high-profile individuals sometimes allowed to flout the law with impunity?  
  
A fundamental rule in global aviation security is that passengers are not permitted to bring liquids through airport screening checkpoints or onto flights.  
  
While travellers may purchase beverages beyond the security gates and in the waiting lounges, these drinks are typically surrendered before boarding.  
  
On international flights, duty-free liquids such as alcohol may be brought onboard, but they must remain sealed until after landing. The goal is to minimise security risks and prevent any misuse of substances mid-flight.  
  
This context is why aviation stakeholders have pushed back on claims made by Fuji music icon, KWAM 1, who insisted that the contents of his personal flask, at the centre of a recent in-flight dispute, were medically necessary water.  
  
Critics argue that if hydration were a concern, the airline crew would have gladly provided water multiple times during the flight, as is standard practice for passengers with health-related needs.  
  
The Chairman of the Senate Committee on Aviation, Senator Buhari Abdulfatai, has expressed deep concern over the recent wave of high-profile airline passenger incidents in Nigeria, ones that have raised serious questions about operational discipline, passenger conduct, and the enforcement of aviation regulations.  
  
He stressed that the developments demand urgent, coordinated intervention to protect the integrity of Nigeria’s aviation sector and restore public confidence in its safety and professionalism.  
  
The broader security risk  
  
While the likelihood of a terrorist hijacking in Nigeria is generally considered low, security analysts warn that the potential consequences of any aviation breach are far too great to ignore.  
  
They argue that the combination of physical security lapses, insider threats, and emerging cyber vulnerabilities makes every incident a critical stress test for the system.  
  
Recent data released by the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria shows that between May and July 2025, there were 187 attempted security breaches at Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos.  
  
These included perimeter intrusions, efforts to smuggle contraband through security, and even suspected acts of insider sabotage.  
  
In one particularly alarming case, thieves managed to dismantle and remove a Flight Management Computer from a parked aircraft, an operation aviation experts believe could not have occurred without internal collusion.  
  
Terrorism, respect, and rule enforcement  
  
The Director of Public Affairs and Consumer Protection at the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority, Mike Achimugu, described any act that disrupts the operation of a flight as tantamount to terrorism.  
  
Speaking during an interview after the incident, he underscored the obligation of every passenger to comply fully with airport protocols and staff instructions.  
  
“Your first responsibility at the airport is to respect and obey instructions from officials on the ground,” he said. “What the passenger (KWAM 1) did, disrupting a flight’s departure, is classified in most jurisdictions as an act of terrorism. There’s no justification for it.”  
  
Achimugu disclosed that a full investigation had been launched to determine how the musician gained access to the sensitive boarding area where the disruption occurred, adding that anyone found culpable would face appropriate sanctions.  
  
He said, “Was air traffic control aware of the interference? Did they issue clearance despite safety concerns? These are questions the investigation must answer.”  
  
However, confidence in the process was shaken after the federal government abruptly discontinued the case against the musician, a decision that critics fear may compromise the credibility of the investigation and set a dangerous precedent for future violations.  
  
Taking a cue  
  
Stakeholders in the sector noted that the domestic airlines in the country should take a cue from the experiences and measures of Ryanair, the single largest airline in Europe.  
  
In August 2024, the chief executive officer of Ryanair, Europe’s largest airline, Michael O’Leary, issued a stern warning that disruptive passengers would face prosecution after the carrier was forced to divert up to three flights weekly due to alcohol and drug-related incidents.  
  
He warned that the airline would hold offenders liable for all diversion-related costs, including accommodation expenses.  
  
This warning came shortly after the airline took legal action against a passenger whose misconduct necessitated an unscheduled stop in Porto, resulting in £12,500 in costs.  
  
O’Leary reported a “notable rise” in alcohol and drug-related incidents, particularly on routes from vacation destinations like Ibiza and the Greek Islands to UK airports including Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester and Edinburgh.  
  
He singled out Ibiza as remaining “by far and away the worst” route for such disturbances.  
  
The Ryanair chief advocated for stricter alcohol controls in airports, emphasising they were “the only places where there are no licensing laws.”  
  
He proposed implementing a two- or three-drink limit before boarding, drawing a parallel to drunk driving regulations.  
  
As part of the measures to tackle the growing menace, he confirmed the airline’s readiness to restrict in-flight alcohol sales as part of its strategy to curb disruptive behaviour.  
  
Echoing these concerns, Ryanair’s Director of Inflight, Sinead Quinn, observed that offenders frequently defied expectations.  
  
“The culprits were often the people you least expected,” she noted, adding that physical assaults and mid-flight altercations between passengers were becoming increasingly common occurrences.  
  
Lessons from abroad  
  
Stakeholders and experts have since condemned what many have described as the ‘kid gloves treatment’ with which the recent incidents have been handled.  
  
They are miffed that the one-month flight ban placed on KWAM1 and Emmason, and their subsequent appointment as “Ambassadors,” are anything but shambolic, ridiculing the country.  
  
Such punishments, they maintained, are not enough of a deterrent to forestall future occurrences.  
  
They were quick to point out the dangerous precedent the “slap on the wrist” punishment portends.  
  
Nigeria’s first professor of Aviation Law, Ismail Mustapha, called for action under the NCAA Act 2022 and ICAO Annexe 17, warning that failure to prosecute the parties involved may imperil Nigeria’s Grade A aviation safety status and violate international obligations.  
  
There has also been considerable public debate over accountability and double standards.  
  
Many observers have questioned whether prominent figures receive leniency, especially compared to less high-profile passengers who have faced harsher consequences for similar offences.  
  
These positions may have gained strength given the way incidents of such magnitude were handled internationally.  
  
In this instance, they are quick to cite the case of influential recruitment tycoon, Salman Iftikhar, who, in August 2025, as a passenger in the first-class cabin of Virgin Atlantic flying from London Heathrow to Lahore, unleashed a torrent of vile abuse against the purser, that is, the cabin crew, while the aircraft was cruising at 39,000 feet above sea level.  
  
He repeatedly called stewardess, Angie Walsh, a “f\*ing b\*\*” before threatening to gang rape her and blow up the five-star hotel where the crew were due to stay.  
  
The father of three also attempted to fight another steward, and according to the court, the ordeal left Walsh “broken” and “traumatised.”  
  
Iftikhar, who had multiple previous convictions, was sentenced to 15 months in prison. However, the sentence is currently under review for being “unduly lenient” following public outcry over what many have called Britain’s “two-tier justice system.”  
  
Similarly, in Russia, a drunken passenger aboard a flight from Ulan-Ude to Moscow locked himself in the toilet, consumed large quantities of alcohol, and later emerged to threaten fellow passengers with stabbing and death.  
  
Male passengers restrained him mid-flight. The aircraft proceeded to Moscow, where police arrested the suspect upon landing.  
  
Similarly, a British citizen, Alexander Michael Dominic MacDonald, was sentenced for disrupting a United Airlines flight from London to Newark on March 1, 2024, an incident that forced the aircraft to divert to Bangor, Maine.  
  
The 30-year-old got into an argument with his travel companion, which soon escalated into a confrontation with the cabin crew while the aircraft was already in U.S. airspace. When the international purser intervened, MacDonald’s behaviour worsened; he became belligerent and threatening, even warning that he would “mess up the plane.”  
  
Crew members restrained him with flex cuffs, and the flight was diverted to Bangor International Airport, approximately 455 miles from its original destination at Newark Liberty International Airport.  
  
The FBI, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and Bangor Police Department investigated the case, and MacDonald was taken into custody and later ordered to pay $20,638 in restitution as part of his sentence.  
  
Prohibited items on flight.  
  
Aviation authorities across the globe prohibit the use of most portable electronic devices below 10,000 ft, even in “flight mode.” The rule is designed to prevent potential interference with aircraft systems during the most critical phases of flight: takeoff and landing.  
  
The concern stems from the fact that devices such as phones, laptops, tablets, and gaming consoles emit radio waves.  
  
In theory, these could disrupt sensitive avionics used for navigation, communications, and collision avoidance.  
  
Multiple devices operating simultaneously, or a damaged device emitting stronger-than-normal signals, could increase the risk.  
  
Although no air crash has been conclusively linked to passenger gadgets, pilots and safety databases contain troubling reports.  
  
NASA’s Aviation Safety Reporting System has documented incidents where instruments malfunctioned until a passenger’s device was switched off.  
  
One case involved a 30-degree navigation error that was immediately corrected when a portable DVD player was powered down, and reappeared when it was turned back on.  
  
Between 2003 and 2009, the International Air Transport Association logged 75 suspected cases of interference from mobile phones and other electronics.  
  
Crew members have described watching compass readings and other navigation data return to normal after devices were disabled.  
  
Some airlines, including Virgin Atlantic and Delta, have introduced technology known as “picocells” to allow limited in-flight mobile use at cruising altitude. These systems connect to satellites and ground networks, enabling calls or data at reduced power levels. However, regulators still ban usage during takeoff and landing to avoid even a minimal risk of interference.  
  
The spokesperson for the UK Civil Aviation Authority, Richard Taylor, says passengers will probably be allowed to use mobile devices more freely on flights in the future, but voice calls are likely to remain banned during takeoff and landing.  
  
“When regulators like us are convinced that an aircraft can be used safely even with portable electronic devices being used in the cabin, that the signal being emitted from the cabin at any stage of the flight can be safely absorbed without affecting any of the aircraft systems, of course, the rules will be relaxed. But it’s up to the manufacturers, and of course to the airlines, to prove that they are operating the aircraft safely,” he said.  
  
Cost of complacency  
  
Many averred that prosecuting cases like those involving KWAM 1 and Comfort Emmanson could serve as a strong deterrent, much like Michael O’Leary’s legal stance at Ryanair.  
  
O’Leary’s decision to prosecute disruptive passengers without assaulting them, but to only recover diversion-related costs, addressed both safety concerns and the financial impact of diversions, while signalling a zero-tolerance approach to misconduct.  
  
Experts believe that applying a similar model in Nigeria, ensuring consequences are swift, transparent, and status-blind, would close the perception gap around “double standards” and reinforce public trust in aviation law enforcement.  
  
Consistent prosecution would also create legal precedents that strengthen future enforcement.  
  
Many of those unhappy with the handling of the incident noted that when offences such as obstructing an aircraft’s movement, assaulting crew members, or vice versa are handled uniformly, regulators and airlines can act decisively without fear of political or public backlash.  
  
This, to a great extent, will reassure passengers, maintain Nigeria’s ICAO safety ratings, and discourage others from testing the limits of acceptable behaviour.  
  
In addition, it empowers aviation staff, knowing their authority will be backed by both the law and management in cases of unruly conduct.  
  
In a sector where even minor disruptions can escalate into major safety risks, a predictable, well-publicised zero-tolerance policy is critical.  
  
By applying it equally to public figures and ordinary travellers, Nigeria can ensure that all passengers understand the personal, financial, and legal costs of misbehaviour before boarding a flight. Ultimately, such firm and consistent action will not only deter unruly passengers but also prevent any terrorist or hijacker from making a move.