

Air France offers to snap up French airline as thousands stranded

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Aigle Zur, which employs almost 1,200 staff, filed for bankruptcy and suspended flights last week

French flag carrier Air France on Monday offered to snap up its much smaller rival Aigle Azur after the airline's collapse stranded thousands of

passengers mainly booked on flights to and from Algeria.

Aigle Zur, which employs almost 1,200 staff, filed for bankruptcy and suspended flights last week after losses which prompted a shareholder coup that ousted the chief executive.

The French secretary of state for transport, Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, told Le Parisien daily there were still 13,000 passengers "in difficulty", only slightly down from 19,000 when the crisis began.

He said these included 11,000 passengers booked on flights into and out of Algeria, 600 on Mali flights as well as other destinations ranging from Russia to Lebanon.

Aigle Azur operates 11 planes but unions say potential suitors are likely to be most interested in its landing slots at the busy Paris Orly airport, the second biggest hub in the French capital in the south of the city.

The head of the Aigle Azur branch of the French pilots' union SNPL, Martin Surzur, said after meeting Djebbari in Paris that two serious offers had been received from potential buyers.

An Air France spokesperson confirmed to AFP that the company had made an offer, without giving further details. The identity of the other potential buyer has yet to be made clear.

'Swept into the bin'

The airline transported last year some 1.9 million passengers, with destinations in Algeria making up half of its operations that brought in 300 million euros (\$329 million) of revenue.

"There needs to be a serious buyer who is capable of offering guarantees

for a maximum number of employees. The good news is that many (potential buyers) have expressed interest," said Djebbari.



A majority of those stranded by the collapse of the airline Aigle Azur have yet to return home

He said the former chief executive of Air France's subsidiary Hop!, Lionel Guerin, was among interested parties, backed by a team of aviation professionals with financial support.

Guerin has yet to confirm his intentions.

Djebbari said British low cost carrier Easyjet could be interested, as could the Dubreuil group, the majority shareholder in Air Caraibes.

The CFDT union said there were a total of 14 offers, but some are only believed to be expressions of intent and others are offering only a partial purchase.

The CFDT said an offer from Air France could secure the jobs of 70 percent of Aigle Azur's personnel in the country.

The largest shareholder in Aigle Azur is the Chinese conglomerate HNA Group, which owns Hainan Airlines, with a 49-percent stake.

David Neeleman, an American airline entrepreneur whose companies include JetBlue and TAP Air Portugal, owns 32 percent, and French businessman Gerard Houa owns 19 percent.

Around one hundred flight attendants, pilots and technicians from Aigle Azur, all in their uniforms, rallied outside the French transport ministry to urge a solution that would preserve their jobs.

"Years of good and loyal services have been swept into the rubbish bin for various reasons that are not entirely clear today," said one staff member, who asked not to be identified.

"All we want is to be listened to and continue to work," said the worker.

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