

# 19 planes 'refused use of airspace'

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*Transport minister Paschal Donohoe said diplomats had inspected cargo manifests and read flight charts*

Nineteen aircraft were refused use of Irish airspace or airports last year over concerns they were carrying indiscriminate military hardware like cluster bombs, it has been revealed.

The mainly US planes, classed as civilian, had sought permission to fly over the country or refuel at Shannon but were rejected on advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs and forced to re-route.

No information has been revealed about the exact type of munitions believed to have been on board, a parliamentary inquiry into the use of the airport by US military was told.

Transport minister [Paschal Donohoe](#) said aviation chiefs were acting on advice from diplomats who had inspected cargo manifests and read flight charts.

"The standard policy of the Department of Foreign Affairs is that it will not allow material carried through our airspace or munitions carried through our airspace that would be indiscriminate in nature," the minister said.

The flights were refused entry to Irish airspace within 48 hours of their expected arrival based on what was written on the cargo manifest, where the plane was due to travel to or from or the international climate at the time, he added.

The Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions, which is examining the use of Shannon by US military on the back of a petition brought to parliament by anti-war campaigner Ed Horgan, heard 65,952 US soldiers passed through the airport last year.

The figure is 80% down from the peak and 4% of the total traffic at the airport.

It was also told that 584 exemptions were granted last year for aircraft to land at Shannon with weapons on board compared to 1,495 in 2007.

Mr Donohoe said the vast majority of exemptions related to "munitions of war" for US soldiers.

"This is more a function of geography than policy," he said.

"In many cases, the most direct flight path between points in North America and points in continental Europe passes through Irish airspace.

"The US Department of Defence has used civil aircraft to transport troops and munitions of war between the US and Europe since the Second World War."

Some 90% of the exemptions involved US airlines chartered by Washington DC for troops carrying sidearms and the remainder were for aircraft carrying military hardware like ammunition, explosives and bombs, usually on cargo planes.

The committee was told weapons were carried unloaded and no ammunition was on board the flights.

No information was available to the committee from the Department of Transport about whether depleted uranium was transported through Irish airspace or airports.

Mr Donohoe claimed the Government relied on assurances from US officials over what guns and weapons were being carried on civilian aircraft and that extraordinary renditions were not taking place through Irish airspace or airports.

"The fact that 19 were turned down is evidence that we do take our responsibilities very carefully," he said.

And he added: "The reason why those 19 were refused was the visibility of what was on the plane and the fact that was listed on the cargo list."

Richard Boyd-Barrett, People Before Profit TD and anti-war campaigner, challenged Mr Donohoe on whether the Government was relying on information from private companies operating cargo flights rather than the US government to determine whether planes could land.

But Mr Donohoe hit back: "The assurances that we are receiving information cover all of the different planes that they (the US) might be using."