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Airbus delivers first superjumbo

Airbus has delivered its first finished A380 superjumbo jet to Singapore Airlines, 18 months behind schedule.

The construction of the A380, able to carry up to 800 passengers, has been beset by persistent and costly delays.

It has also been overshadowed by allegations of insider trading against managers at parent company EADS.

Chief executive Thomas Enders said the delivery of the world's largest commercial jet aircraft was "the latest milestone in a long journey".

Singapore Airlines took delivery of the double-decker plane at Airbus headquarters in Toulouse, at a ceremony attended by more than 500 people.

It will be flown to its new home at Singapore's Changi airport on Wednesday.

The aircraft's first commercial flight will take place on 25 October, when the A380 takes off for Sydney.

"I realise how unsettling recent times, particularly the last 18 months, have been, but that only serves to make this achievement all the more impressive," Mr Enders told Airbus employees at the ceremony.

'Overcoming obstacles'

Airbus said on Monday it was on track to meet its target for A380 deliveries in 2008 and did not envisage further delays.

This has been a very difficult delivery and the troubles will resonate for some time

John Nance, aviation analyst, on A380

Le Journal du Dimanche had reported on Sunday that Airbus remained worried about deliveries and had introduced a new set of measures last month to weed out any further delays.

To meet its revised production schedule, Airbus must hand over 13 completed planes in 2008 and four every month in 2009 and 2010.

Delays to the flagship project have cost Airbus 6bn euros (£4.17bn; \$8.5bn) and analysts believe the planemaker must now sell 420 models to make a profit on it.

It currently has 189 confirmed orders and tentative sales agreements in place.

Mr Enders and other executives have been under scrutiny for their role in the sale of EADS shares before the announcement in June 2006 that the A380 project would be delayed, news which led to a slump in the company's share price.

The matter is currently being investigated by French prosecutors but Mr Enders, other senior managers and EADS shareholders have all denied any wrongdoing.

Boeing problems

Many analysts remain to be convinced that Airbus' gamble on the success of the A380 - driven by what it believes will be ever-growing demand for long-haul travel between key global destinations - will pay off.

"It is something to celebrate when you launch a new airplane and get it turned over to a client," said John Nance, a US aviation analyst.

"But this has been a very difficult delivery and the troubles will resonate for some time.

"I am sure she will fly well and it is a magnificent achievement but I think it is a white elephant."

Airbus is battling with rival Boeing for supremacy in the civil aviation manufacturing market.

Boeing revealed recently that production of its new 787 aircraft - known as the Dreamliner - would be delayed by six months, leading some airlines to call for compensation.

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