ICAO AUDIT FLAGS ATC STAFF SHORTAGE IN INDIA

News / Airlines

A severe shortage of air traffic controllers (ATCOs) in India may prove to be the latest worry for international aviation authorities and trigger a global fear over flying in the country. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), a UN agency, completed its audit of Indian aviation last week and is learnt to have red-flagged the shortage.

While the ICAO report will be ready in about 90 days, sources said its officials made their concerns clear during the audit.

Highly placed sources said that if ICAO makes this issue a "serious safety concern" in its report, there could be critical repercussions for Indian aviation.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had downgraded the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in January 2014 due to its poor oversight capability of aviation caused by the lack of technical manpower. The downgrade was reversed 14 months later in April 2015 after India took

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steps to beef up its weak aviation regulator.

"If the ICAO audit red-flags the shortage of ATCOs, then other aviation agencies -- notably the FAA -- could also issue their own alerts or want to conduct their own audits. It could open the Pandora's Box for us and technically pave the way for yet another safety downgrade for Indian aviation, something that will have a tremendous impact for Indian airlines," a source said.

Air traffic control comes directly under the Airports Authority of India (AAI) because the plan to hive it off as a separate company has been pending for years.

A senior AAI official said, "India has between 2,500 and 2,800 ATCOs. For many years no hiring of controllers took place that led to the current situation. Now AAI has inducted 200 ATCOs; will conduct exam for hiring 400 more on December 29 and has started the process of hiring 200 more. By next March we will have 600 more ATCOs and then 200 additional will join a few months later."

While AAI is now hiring controllers, the situation of the ground is worrying. "There is a serious shortage of controllers. We are asked to work on our off days and also put on extra hours. Our work conditions are very stressful and that is not conducive to safe flying," said a senior controller.

The worst situation is in the busy and constrained airport of Mumbai. "The megapolis has only 265 controllers while the requirement is anywhere from 350 to 550. Controllers do not want to be posted in Mumbai due to shortage of accommodation and as a result the available workforce is severely over-worked," said a source.

ICAO is also learnt to have expressed concern at the congestion of communication channels between ATC and aircraft. The lack of continuity at the top of DGCA, which has had seven director-generals in last eight years, was also emerged as a sore point in the audit. The current DG, M Sathiyavathy, an IAS officer who was this summer empanelled to become a secretary in the government of India, is also slated to move out early next year as she was asked to continue as regulator till the ICAO audit got over.

"The audit team asked M Sathiyavathy if she will also move on shortly and she had to allay their fears about DGCA having a stable leadership," said a source.

DGCA's officers say that Sathiyavathy has proven to be a "good boss with a firm grip on aviation safety issues". They want either Sathiyavathy to stay on as DG or that her successor be a technical officer who has risen from within the ranks.

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