



SABENA ALLIANCE TAKES THE CONGO MROS TO A NEW LEVEL

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Belgian MRO specialist Sabena Aerospace has linked up with Equatorial Congo Air (ECAir) to create a central African MRO centre. As Alan Dron discovered, this will help instil an aviation culture in a new generation of local technicians.

The signing, in July 2014, of the agreement to set up a new MRO facility at the Republic of the Congo's Maya Maya International Airport in Brazzaville was a long-held goal for Stéphane Burton, Sabena Aerospace's CEO and main shareholder.

For many years he had believed there was a need in Africa for a facility that would not only offer good-quality, cost-efficient maintenance services, but also play a role in training local people in the complexities of aircraft servicing.

ECAir, the Congolese flag-carrier, shared this vision of training local people, said Burton. It resulted in the two organisations deciding to establish a joint venture (JV).

The companies will create a facility that meets European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)

standards. Currently, the Republic of the Congo is on the European Union's aviation blacklist because of concerns over its maintenance and regulatory standards (EC Air is able to fly into Europe because its crews and technical support are provided by Swiss airline PrivatAir.) The JV – called sa@ec, for sabenaerospace@ecair – will be majority-controlled (51%-49%) by the Belgian company. “We have the majority. That's normal, because we will run the operation. We will be the accountable manager to the EASA authorities,” said Burton.

Sabena Aerospace already has considerable experience in Africa. It supports low-cost carrier Fastjet in Dar-es-Salaam, Harare and Kinshasa and, as well as the new Brazzaville operation, it operates in the Congolese city of Pointe-Noire and aims to establish two further African line stations in 2016.

There were several reasons for linking up with ECAir, said Burton. Firstly, it meant that it had the best chance of winning the maintenance business for ECAir itself and, for any MRO operation, it was important to have that type of reliable revenue stream.

Secondly, whenever Sabena Aerospace set up an operation in Africa, it tried to link up, either commercially or through a shareholding, with a local partner that had good connections with the authorities in the country. This was the case with ECAir, in which the Congolese Government is majority shareholder.

The new organisation will start work by undertaking line maintenance up to 'A'-checks, followed by a wheel repair shop, then by repairs on small components, such as batteries and oxygen masks – “Not too highly technical items.”

The initial premises at the international airport in Brazzaville will be a refurbished 500sqm building, but the JV intends to build a hangar of roughly 6,000sqm that will be capable of taking a Boeing 787. Work on this two-year project is due to start in the first half of 2016.

ECAir is acquiring two Boeing 787-8s; its fleet currently consists of one Boeing 767-300ER, two 757-200s and four 737s – two 737-300s and two -700s. With the 787 arrival in mind, the MRO will add a sheet metal and composites repair facility.

Sabena Aerospace's Brussels facility already has a composites capability, as it provides support to the 787s of Belgian airline Jetairfly: “We will extend this capability into Brazzaville,” said Burton. A training centre will also be established to create new staff and help build a safety-oriented aviation culture in Congo.

At the Paris signing ceremony setting up the JV, ECAir CEO Fatima Beyina-Moussa commented: “One of our priorities is training and we are confident that this partnership will play a key role in our moving to the next level.”

Initially, a small number of European personnel will be stationed in Brazzaville. “Over time, they will be replaced by locals and we are already recruiting,” said Burton. “We expect, within three to five years, that the Congo operation will have 30-40 staff, of which the majority will be aircraft technicians or component technicians.”

Congolese staff will be trained from scratch, initially in Brussels. It typically takes four to five years to train an aircraft technician. During the theoretical part of the training course, local trainees “might start working with us, not touching the aircraft, but just seeing how it's done. There's a certain culture to learn in aviation.”

The aim of the new facility is to siphon off some of the maintenance work from central African carriers that currently goes to South Africa, the Middle East or even Europe.

Burton noted that the Republic of the Congo had the stability necessary for investment and stressed that Sabena Aerospace was not looking for a quick return. The company was there for the long term, he said.

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