

Regulator wants pvt carriers to pool pilots for safety inspections

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New Delhi/ Mumbai: Faced with a critical shortage of flight safety inspectors who help maintain safety in India's crowded skies, the country's civil aviation regulator plans to ask private sector carriers to pool their pilots to carry out the vital tasks, and also bear the cost of these inspections, said an official close to the development.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation, or DGCA, currently has only four flight inspectors to ensure safety standards in an industry that has nearly doubled its fleet to more than 600 aircraft in the past three years, as reported by *Mint* on 21 April.

"The airlines will have to compulsorily provide pilots to the DGCA on a rotation basis and pay for them," said a government official who did not want to be named. The regulator is working on a draft proposal and will soon formalize it, he added.

"But, DGCA cannot directly take money from airlines for paying inspectors. Instead, they can increase the aircraft registration fee that is collected when an aircraft is imported," said an executive with a Mumbai-based airline who did not want to be named.

It couldn't be established what the additional cost could likely be.

Between April 2007 and March 2008, DGCA reported 14 accidents, including eight serious ones, 979 aircraft safety related incidents that included 26 dangerous airplane proximity incidents while in the air, and 201 bird strikes.

Airline executives said the carriers will cooperate. "Actually, we are looking for a similar arrangement. Pooling talents to ensure safety and speedy procedures is always welcome, even if it means additional expenses," said an executive of a New Delhi-based airline who did not want to be identified since the shortage of inspectors is a sensitive issue with the government.

"In the US, airlines do pool their pilots for similar functions," said the executive with the Mumbai-based airline. More inspectors would mean the quality standards are met without compromise, he said.

Previously, senior pilots of India's national carriers, that are now merged as the National Aviation Co. of India Ltd, would conduct flight inspections while on deputation to DGCA. However, the national carriers stopped recommending names as no pilot wanted to work on DGCA salaries, which were much lower than what they earned as pilots, the government official said.

The global regulatory agency, International Civil Aviation Organization, or ICAO, has also been critical of DGCA on safety. "The (DGCA) surveillance programme does not take into consideration the need to increase the number of inspections for effective safety oversight of the operations in relation to the size, scope and number of aircraft types used by each air operator," it had said in its 2007 Final Safety Oversight Audit Report, an exercise it conducts

once in 10 years. The latest audit was conducted in October 2006 by ICAO staff led by Henry Gourджи.

“Despite the minimal surveillance programme established, the Flight Inspection Directorate has only been able to carry out 10% of its planned surveillance activities to date. In addition, there is no coordination between the Flight Inspection Directorate and the regional offices to include in the surveillance programme en-route cabin inspections, cabin crew recurrent training and the continued competency of appointed cabin safety instructors and examiners,” said ICAO’s report seen by *Mint*.

The report pointed out that even dangerous goods were not inspected according to schedule. “Dangerous goods inspections are not conducted in conjunction with the renewal of dangerous goods approval, nor are they based on a scheduled surveillance programme”.

It found 40% of the 242 established technical positions in DGCA were vacant. “Many of the directorates are short staffed and are not able to accomplish all of their assigned functions and responsibilities. For instance, the Aerodromes Standards Directorate has a 50% vacancy rate with positions repeatedly advertised for years and is still unable to attract qualified applicants.”

DGCA employs 306 people, compared with Air India’s 32,438. It depends largely on Central government funds of about Rs63 crore to run its operations, according to its 2007-08 annual report and the outcome budget 2008-09 of the civil aviation ministry.

The ICAO found personnel at the regulator’s headquarters in New Delhi, housed in a converted aircraft hangar, lacked even adequate computers to access relevant data and international manuals.

It is unclear if any of the report’s findings have been acted upon because the DGCA director general himself admitted last month that there was a serious shortage of flight inspectors.

“India has had expansion, and fortunately, you have not had the (fatal) accidents. The challenge with India is managing huge expansion with the number of flights and passengers mushrooming,” said Paul Hayes, director of London-based aerospace consultancy Ascend, in an interview early January when asked about India’s safety record.

In 2007, 631 passengers were killed globally in accidents on passenger flights— which is 159 less than in 2006, when 790 passengers died. Despite high growth, this decade has fared better so far with an average of 718.9 deaths a year, compared with the 1990s average of 954.4 people, according to Ascend. Hayes said, “You have been lucky.”