



AVIATION BODY BREATHES EASIER AS AUDIT DELAYED

News / Airlines



The UN's International Civil **Aviation** Organization (ICAO) has agreed to postpone an **audit** of Cambodia's aviation authority until June 2016 to give the agency more time to prepare.

Sinn Chanserey Vutha, spokesman of the State Secretariat of Civil Aviation (SSCA) said yesterday that his organisation was confident it would pass the audit, but had requested more time to ensure the best possible outcome.

"Flight safety management is not a challenge for us," he said. "We can handle it, even though we have more flights, and we can manage the safety of the passengers and planes."

"But we need more time in order to better respond on the protocol questionnaire," he continued.

"We need experts to help us respond the right way, and supported by evidence."

Cambodia fared poorly during its last full audit by the ICAO in 2007, falling short of international standards in almost every criteria.

Serious deficiencies were reported in the oversight of air navigation services and accident investigations, which were reiterated during a follow-up investigation last year.

The ICAO had scheduled a full audit for November 2015, with some aviation analysts warning that a poor review could result in Cambodia's aviation regulator being "blacklisted" by the international safety body.

Vutha said Cambodia has worked to address the deficiencies noted in the last audit and was in a far better position ahead of its next review.

"The SSCA has strengthened standards and regulations more than before, as well as human resources," he said. "We are confident that we will not be blacklisted, and that our score will be better than in 2007."

However, the task is bigger. The Kingdom's aviation has grown significantly in the eight years since the last full audit, with more airlines and far more passenger traffic. Tourism arrivals have grown from 2 million in 2007 to over 4.5 million last year, while the SSCA has licensed new airlines to handle the increased load.

Last year, the authority issued airline operation certificates (AOCs) to three Chinese-backed airlines – Bassaka Air, Cambodia Bayon Airlines and Apsara Air – prompting concerns that airlines were seeking to base operations in Cambodia because of its lax regulatory standards.

"As it is much more difficult to start an airline in China, establishing a Cambodian airline to pursue the China-Cambodia market represents a far more attractive solution," the Australia-based Centre for Aviation (CAPA) said in a report issued in February.

Vutha said Cambodia will need to demonstrate to the ICAO that it is not cutting corners on passenger safety.

"We need to prove that we can inspect airlines to ensure they operate according to safety standards," he said.

A failing grade could have a serious impact on Cambodia's growing tourism sector, resulting in both restrictions on airlines operating in the Kingdom and a dent in tourism.

Ho Vandy, former co-chair of the Government-Private Sector Working Group on Tourism, said he was optimistic that civil aviation authorities were well prepared for the upcoming audit. He stressed, however, the importance of the review's outcome.

"It's like an exam," he said. "If we get a good score, it will make tourists more confident to visit Cambodia. But if not, it will make them worried and turn them off."

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