

NEW AIRLINE IN DRCONGO AIMS TO REVOLUTIONISE INTERNAL AIR TRANSPORT

News / Airlines



A new [airline](#) was launched in the Democratic Republic of Congo on Friday, a bid to revolutionise air transport within the vast country where flights are currently operated only by the UN and small carriers blacklisted by the EU.

Two Airbus A320 jets belonging to Congo Airways left the capital Kinshasa's Ndjili international airport on the inaugural flights carrying invited guests, after an official launch ceremony attended by President Joseph Kabila.

The first flight left at around 11:00 a.m. bound for the eastern town of Goma via the country's third city of Kisangani.

The second flight departed three minutes later for southeastern Lubumbashi, the country's second city.

"The launch of Congo Airways is the symbol of the economic and financial independence of the

DRC," Transport Minister Justin Kalumba said in a speech.

It is "a recognition of the break from a dark past ... to an illustrious future for air transport" in the country.

The head of Congo Airways, Claude Kirongozi, said the air transport sector "has been marginalised for a long time, with as a consequence the blacklisting of all the air transport companies operating in Congo."

He gave no date for the start of commercial services. But a source close to Congo Airways said last month that this could take place "around mid-October."

Internal air transport in the immense country -- half the size of the European Union -- is currently operated largely by the United Nations, chiefly for its own use or for humanitarian purposes.

The small local airlines that do operate are all on a European Union blacklist, which means that they cannot fly into EU airspace.

Air France is providing technical assistance to the new airline, which is being financed with public funds.

Infrastructure overhaul

Air transport infrastructure is also being overhauled in the DRC, one of the least developed countries in the world and where air accidents occur frequently due to ageing fleets, lack of security controls and poor weather conditions.

Congo Airways will initially fly to eight towns and cities, and this will be expanded to 14 after three years.

Congo Airways "aims in the short term to acquire other aircraft in order to serve the whole country," said Kirongozi.

The two Airbus planes - which now bear the airline's colours of red, yellow, blue and white and a flying leopard on the tail fin -- were bought second-hand from Italy's Alitalia for around 50 million dollars (44 million euros).

One of them was impounded for almost a month in Ireland following legal proceedings launched by DRC creditors, but finally arrived in Kinshasa on September 26.

The company's launch follows the desire of DRC authorities to develop the country and to gradually open up some regions that are inaccessible by road, despite a national budget of only around 9.0 billion dollars for 2015.

One lawmaker taking the flight to Lubumbashi, Romain Kalonji, complained about the "exorbitant" cost of flights in the country and hoped that Congo Airways would help make flying more affordable.

Kirongozi said that "everything has been implemented to ensure reasonable fares."

But flying is still likely to remain beyond the financial reach of most Congolese.

The DRC was torn apart by two wars between 1996 and 2003, and some regions remain in the grip of violence by militias.

But the fact that an airline can serve Goma, capital of Nord-Kivu, the province that is emblematic of the suffering of eastern DRC, bears witness to some improvement in the security situation.

Ethiopian Airlines in July launched the first regular international service to Goma for many years, from Addis Ababa.

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