

DRONES GIVE AIR CARGO A NEW BUZZ

News / Airlines



Africa is one of the fastest-growing markets in the world. But, while the rise in trade is boosting airfreight, infrastructural problems remain. Studies show that drones will be able to cater for 10 to 20% of regional cargo transportation in the future. Vincent Chappard reports.

Data released by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) for global airfreight markets show a very modest increase in September. On a continental basis, African carriers experienced demand growth of 2.5% and capacity rose by 8.1%. Regional trade generated increases in the volumes.

There is huge scope for cargo, even if only 15% of trade is inter African. Many people believe drone cargo will prove to be the sustainable answer because of Africa's sparse road networks. "Throwing time-dependent goods into the sky and moving them about with a flying robot is a good idea in Africa and beyond," said Jonathan Ledgard, director of the future Africa initiative at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and founder of the RedLine project. The first commercial cargo drone port will be operational in 2016 in Rwanda. The route will be about 80 kilometres long and will connect several towns and villages. The first cargo drones will carry small payloads of two kilos and will serve hospitals and humanitarian emergencies.

Other early adopters will use them to deliver payloads to government offices, mines, oil and gas installations and ranches.

According to Ledgard, they will quickly evolve into larger and heavier craft until they can lift 20 kilos, or more, over several hundred kilometres.

Ledgard is not only a novelist but also a leading thinker on risk, nature and technology in near future Africa. He spent the last decade as Africa correspondent for The Economist and reported the continent's mobile phone revolution.

As founder of the RedLine project, he is convinced that "we will make more intensive use of air sky using flying robots to move goods faster and more accurately". Now it's time for the drone revolution.

"The first routes presage the future railways in the sky but they are also equivalent of the donkey paths that wind up through wooded mountains in some parts of the world, cresting at a remote village, then winding down the other side."

Ledgard underlines that "cargo drones are a supplementary transport system, not a disruptive one". Cargo drones will fly in what Ledgard calls the "lower sky" (roughly the height of the Eiffel Tower) and in an air corridor about 200 metres wide and 150 metres high. The routes will be geofenced.

And, for this futuristic challenge, he has the collaboration of Lord Norman Foster, who is the lead architect on the concept for an affordable RedLine droneport powered by solar energy. This entirely connected station, the petrol station of the future, will manage the ballet of drones forming the fleet.

Africa is a fast expanding continent with geographical and social problems. But high-technology can help bridge the gap and bring efficient solutions to lack of adequate infrastructure and remoteness, while creating jobs and boosting local economies.

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