



LIBYA TAKES UP THE FIGHT TO REBUILD

News / Airlines



Libya's post-revolution civil war has crippled the country's aviation sector, with airports and aircraft damaged by fighting and all international carriers forced to withdraw from the Libyan market. A year after intense clashes destroyed Tripoli International Airport, the Airports Authority is planning to build a semi-permanent terminal and get international flights back up and running. Tom Westcott reports from Tripoli.

It is one year after Tripoli International Airport was caught up in a battle between rival militias, which saw Libya's embryonic civil war spread across the country. Planes still lie in charred pieces on the runway, the air traffic control tower is riddled with holes from heavy artillery fire and the burnt-out terminal building has become a haven for birds.

After the 2011 revolution, which overthrew long-term dictator Muammar Qaddafi, armed groups that had fought in the uprising were tasked with providing security across the country.

Militias from the town of Zintan controlled the airport and some parts of the capital, while groups from the city of Misrata were in charge of securing other areas of Tripoli. However, during three years of post-revolutionary instability, tensions mounted between these former allies.

In July 2014, Misrata militias led an attack on the airport to expel the Zintan forces, and five days of intense fighting at the airport and three weeks of clashes in the surrounding area resulted in devastating losses for the aviation sector. The Zintan forces withdrew allowing the Misrata militias

to advance on the capital 30 kilometres away, resurrecting the former parliament and creating a new government in opposition to the internationally recognised institutions.

While flames engulfed the terminal building, hangers were bombarded with heavy weaponry and aircraft worth millions of dollars were assaulted – sprayed with bullets, set ablaze or climbed over by fighters who posed for photos on the fuselage. Ten aircraft were completely destroyed and a further 10 damaged severely, with others sustaining minor damage.

A year later, on the fringes of the ravaged airport, engineers are now hard at work patching up the aircraft bullet holes. The Airports Authority has been working on plans to rebuild the ruins of the former terminal to create a semi-permanent replacement that could enable international operations to resume.

“We have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for rebuilding the terminal and work is expected to start at the end of this year,” said Libya Airports Authority director of air transport affairs Ibrahim Wali. The MoU is between the ministry of transport and Libya’s state-run Organisation for the Development of Administrative Centres (ODAC).

“They are still negotiating, so the final contract has not yet been signed but its value will be a minimum of LYD 100 million (\$72 million),” he explained, adding that this could extend to as much as LYD 300 million (\$216 million).

“As well as the terminal buildings, there is a lot of maintenance work to be completed and we will have to meet the minimum international requirements and regulations.” The airport’s air traffic control system and tower – riddled with holes from artillery fire – also requires a complete overhaul, as does the fire-fighting area and equipment. The airport’s two runways, however, were not damaged by the fighting and remain intact, needing only modest maintenance.

After discussing three different options, ODAC has decided on a two-floored semi-permanent terminal, with the capacity to handle around three million passengers. “The concrete sections of the terminal were not damaged so the new design will fit around these, incorporating some of the old structure,” Wali said. “The departure lounge will be new but the arrivals hall will be the same because this was not badly damaged.”

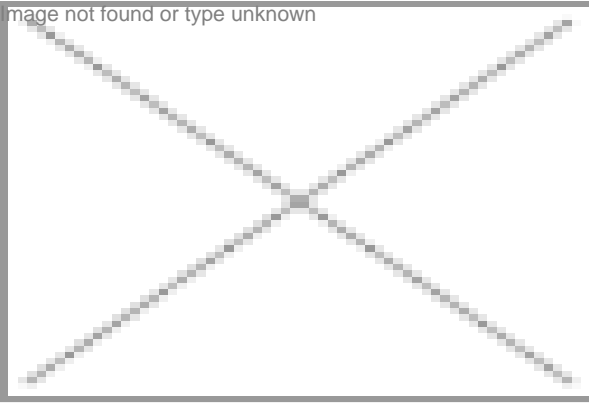
The work will be subcontracted to foreign partners, he explained. With European companies still reluctant to work in Libya, not least because no European embassies have missions in the country at present, Wali predicted that the partner companies were likely to be either Turkish or Egyptian. “This will be a temporary terminal that could last between five and eight years, basically until the French company working on the new airport can return,” Wali explained.

In 2007, a contract with an estimated value of LYD2.54 billion (\$1.8 billion) for the expansion of Tripoli International Airport was awarded to French company Aeroport de Paris International (ADPI), with works undertaken by Brazilian firm Odebrecht in a joint venture with Turkish and Greek companies. “The new airport should have been finished by the end of 2015. The contract still exists and these companies will come back, they have to, but they can’t come back yet,” he said.

In the wake of four years of post-revolution instability, successive faltering governments and an on-going civil war, the country is on the brink of economic collapse but, Wali insists, there is money to fund the rebuilding of the airport. “The money is already there as ODAC had another project with the Libyan Civil Aviation Authority (LYCAA) which is stable, so the money for that project will be transferred to this one,” he explained. “The money is there and work on the new terminal is expected to start by the end of this year.”

In preparation for this, clearance operations by a Libyan scrap metal company are already under way.

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For those working at the airport, being surrounded by the destruction is a daily reminder of the high cost of those first few weeks of civil war. “It’s such a pity,” said Ramadan Malti, chief engineer for Libyan Airlines – one of the country’s two state-owned operators. “In total 12 of our planes – four A320s, an A330, two ATRs and five CRJs – were damaged and some are beyond economic repair.”

Malti heads a team of nearly 40 engineers who, working in shifts, have spent the last six months patching up an Airbus A320, riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel

damage. “We have almost finished this one. It has taken about six months to make these temporary repairs and it should be ready in another month,” he said. These repairs will ready the aircraft for a single flight to an Airbus workshop in Europe, where the damaged fuselage will be replaced.

At the other end of the airport, engineers for Libya’s other state-owned carrier, Afriqiyah Airways, are also repairing three planes. “We started working on this Airbus A319 in October last year,” engineer Abdullah Al-Tershani explained. “This one needed almost 50 individual repairs.”

The process is time-consuming, he said, with dimensions and photographs of each damaged area being sent to Airbus for confirmation that the proposed repair is acceptable.

Other aircraft bombarded by missiles and bullets at the airport were already redundant.

Abandoned planes, some dating back to the Kingdom of Libya, had been a feature for decades and more were left to deteriorate during Qaddafi’s 42-year rule, when sanctions made the acquisition of spare parts difficult.

One western plane enthusiast visiting the airport in 2013 suggested an aviation museum would attract many international visitors but now even many of these historic aircraft have been ruined. The on-going civil conflict continues to have an impact on the country’s aviation sector. Tripoli’s former military airbase of Mitiga now serves the capital but, Wali said, it is no substitute for the sprawling former international airport. “Mitiga is being used only by Libyan carriers because it has little infrastructure and is not security-cleared for international flights,” he pointed out.

Despite a capacity for around 3,000 passengers it struggles to manage these, with services characterised by delays and cancellations. However, as Wali said: “It is better than nothing.” Mitiga has just one option for Europe – an often fully-booked service to Malta on an 18-seater Beechcraft 1900D aircraft, owned by Libyan- Maltese joint-venture Medavia.

Based in Malta, Medavia is the only international operator now serving Libya. “There were 24 foreign operators before the revolution and after the revolution there were 13. But now only Medavia and Libyan carriers fly here,” he said, adding that most travellers preferred to drive overland to neighbouring Tunisia from where they could fly to Europe.

Mitiga is one of 18 Libyan airports, only six of which are still operational, most suspended by the LYCAA because of nearby fighting or security issues.

The closed airports, lack of international flights and reduced domestic services have caused problems for many Libyan citizens.

With no trains or a proper system of buses, aviation had previously acted as public transport, with cheap government-subsidised flights connecting remote towns and cities in the vast country.

Wali hopes that, if the area surrounding Tripoli remains peaceful, the rebuilding of Tripoli International Airport could start as early as this autumn. “It should take about eight months to finish, maximum one year, and could be operational by the middle of 2016,” he said.

“We are losing money but so are many people whose jobs relied on the airport, from cafe owners to taxi drivers. The problems last year affected a lot of things and we hope that rebuilding and reopening the airport will give international companies the confidence to come back to work in

Libya.”

The completion of a major construction project such as Tripoli Airport and the prospect of returning international companies could offer hope to people across Libya, a country which, after decades of neglect and four years of instability, is in urgent need of extensive rebuilding.

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