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European inspection programme targets aircraft during airport turnarounds

A European initiative to perform ramp checks of aircraft arriving from other countries focuses on compliance with ICAO requirements and goes hand-in-hand with ICAO audits of safety oversight systems in European countries.

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RAPID changes in the field of aviation -- among them the growth of charter flights, emergence of low-cost operators and use of dry leasing arrangements, together with a significant increase in air traffic over the long term -- have made it more burdensome for many States to oversee compliance of airlines with the standards of the Chicago Convention. To maintain confidence in the safety oversight system, ICAO carries out regular, transparent and mandatory audits of safety oversight systems, and distributes the main audit conclusions to its Contracting States.

The European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC), a regional body having 41 member States,* has recently developed an inspection programme of its own that complements ICAO safety oversight audits in Europe by concentrating on checks of aircraft during stops at European airports. The principle behind the Safety Assessment of Foreign Aircraft (SAFA) Programme is simple: in each ECAC member State, aircraft arriving from another country, including other ECAC member countries, are subject to ramp inspections chiefly concerned with the aircraft's documents and crew, the apparent condition of the aircraft and the carriage of mandatory cabin equipment. The ramp inspections are intended to identify non-compliance with ICAO requirements set out in the annexes to the Chicago Convention, specifically the provisions concerned with personnel licensing (Annex 1), the operation of aircraft (Annex 6) and airworthiness of aircraft (Annex 8).

During 2002, ECAC member States performed approximately 3,200 inspections involving 532 different operators from 115 countries. One feature of the SAFA Programme is an annual report describing the trends reflected by the findings.

Inspections are conducted according to common procedures and the results described using a common reporting format. This commonality is an essential prerequisite to analysis that determines whether action should be taken against an

* The member States of ECAC are: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

individual operator. Commonality is promoted through training sessions for inspectors that familiarize them with SAFA inspection and reporting procedures, and thus minimize the potential for variations in their interpretation and implementation.

In addition to considering the number of findings, inspectors categorize the findings according to their seriousness. A **Category 1** finding is a minor one which indicates that the safe operation of the aircraft is not affected. **Category 2** findings concern deficiencies that have a limited effect on the safe operation of the aircraft.

In **Category 3**, major findings that concern the safe operation of the aircraft are listed. Follow-up action is defined on the basis of the category of finding.

In the case of major or significant findings, the operator and the appropriate oversight authority are contacted about the corrective measures to be taken, not only for the aircraft that was inspected, but possibly others when the finding is of a generic nature.

For instance, a finding may be linked to a type of aircraft or to an operator's practice, and therefore may apply to an entire fleet.

All reports and their data are kept in a central computerized database set up by the Joint Aviation Authorities (JAA), the European regulatory body associated with ECAC. The database also holds supplementary information such as a list of actions carried out following an inspection. The information on the database is reviewed by the JAA on a regular basis to identify areas of concern.

At present the database contains more than 17,000 reports which can be accessed on-line by ECAC member States and ICAO headquarters through a secured intranet. However, to promote transparency while respecting the need for confidentiality, ECAC publishes an annual report describing programme developments and providing an overview of the inspections carried out and the trends indicated by the findings.

The oversight authorities of ECAC member States choose which aircraft to inspect. Some authorities carry out random inspections, while others try to target aircraft or airlines that they suspect do not comply with ICAO standards.

Depending on the volume of international flights and the availability of inspectors in each ECAC member State, the number of inspections may vary from a relatively few to several hundred each year. The aircraft checks may include:

- pilot licenses;
- written procedures and manuals that should be carried in the cockpit;
- compliance with procedures by flight and cabin crew;
- safety equipment in cockpit and cabin;
- cargo carried in the aircraft; and
- the apparent condition of the aircraft.

A checklist of 54 inspection items is used during a ramp check. When the turn-around time is not sufficient to go through the full checklist, only selected items are inspected. It is SAFA's policy not to delay an aircraft, **except for safety reasons**.

During 2002, inspectors from 25 ECAC States performed approximately 3,200 inspections involving 532 different operators from 115 countries and 170 different types of aircraft. According to the database, over the past five years an average of one finding was made during each inspection, and every 100 items inspected resulted in three findings.

While valuable, ramp inspections cannot provide the full picture about the safety of a particular aircraft or operator. This can only be achieved through continuous oversight by the responsible aviation authority.

When breaking down the ratio of findings by category, 46 percent fall under Category 1, 40 percent under Category 2 and 13 percent under Category 3. In other words, **every 10 inspections lead to one significant finding about an item that might affect aircraft safety**, a rate that has been more or less stable over the past few years. At the same time, there has been a downward trend in the Category 1 and 2 findings. An outlook by ICAO regions indicates that operators from States belonging to the Asia-Pacific, European and South American regions have fewer findings per inspection than average.

More than 60 inspectors from ECAC member States attended SAFA training courses in 2002. Since the start of the training programme, 260 inspectors from 34 ECAC States have participated in the courses.

In addition to the more theoretical approach of training, ECAC has initiated a programme to enhance on-the-job experience through exchange visits between inspectors of different countries.

The participation in the day-to-day operation of a ramp inspection scheme in another country increases practical knowledge and skills. A side benefit is the potential for such arrangements to advance uniform application of SAFA inspection and reporting procedures. In 2002, inspectors from two ECAC States participated in exchange visits.

From the outset, **SAFA has been linked to the ICAO Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme (USOAP) through the signing of a memorandum of understanding between ICAO and ECAC in November 1997.** The agreement calls for mutual support and cooperation. Similarly, the European Union supports the programme through funding made available to JAA by the European Commission.

This cooperative approach is being extended to civil aviation administrations in Canada, the United States and the Russian Federation by means of data sharing or familiarization visits by inspectors.

Experience with SAFA inspections over the last few years shows that the process provides a valuable overall indication of the safety of foreign operators.

Understandably, such inspections cannot provide the full picture about the safety of a particular aircraft or operator. Certain aspects, such as the use of crew resource management, cannot be assessed during the limited time available to perform a ramp inspection.

The full assessment of an aircraft or its operator can only be achieved through continuous oversight by the responsible aviation authority.

The information gained through the SAFA Programme is useful, however, and the inspections contribute to the safe operation of the aircraft inspected. SAFA also provides the opportunity for countries to cooperate in resolving specific safety-related problems. The SAFA Programme has its place in the safety chain and clearly provides an important contribution to aviation safety in general.