

**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**1 August 2012**

## **SACAA WARNS OF DANGERS OF LASER BEAMS**

The South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA) is launching an awareness campaign to alert members of the public using laser pointers, of the risks when distracting pilots or air traffic controllers on duty. In a joint press conference including the Air Traffic and Navigation Services (ATNS), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Airline Pilots' Association of South Africa (ALPA), the Director of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) Mr Zakhele Thwala, today warned of potential disastrous events if laser beams continue to be directed at aircraft by civilians on the ground. He said that the aviation industry has great concern about the illegal use of laser beams, and stated that 102 incidents of strong laser beams being flashed at aircraft, had been reported to the CAA by the ATNS within a mere 7 months, from December 2011 until the end June 2012.

Mr Thwala warned that flashing a light beam or other energy source, whether visible or not, towards any aircraft, air traffic control tower or any person therein is prohibited by the Civil Aviation Regulations and contravention could result in a fine or imprisonment of 10 years, or both.

Mr Hennie Marais, an Executive from Air Traffic Management, said that when a flight deck is illuminated, the bright light inside is a distraction to both pilots and air traffic controllers and these incidents pose a risk of catastrophic events taking place; as they lose information when temporarily losing sight. Captain Margaret Viljoen who represented ALPA, has experienced this herself, and added that pilots could lose their configuration while being blinded by the light, and that this usually happens during the critical phases of takeoff and landing. A few years ago, ALPA already embarked on a project to equip pilots in such a situation. Pilots also have to inform the ATC and the Police of such incidents. ALPA emphasised the need for the public to have a greater understanding of the significance of laser beam flashing at aircraft.

Aletta Karsten, a laser physicist from the CSIR, condemned the irresponsible use of laser pointers in the strongest terms on behalf of the CSIR, and called upon the public to report anyone engaging on such activities. Providers and users of laser pointers are legally obligated to be registered at the Department of Health. She explained that strong laser pointers directed on the retina of the eye, cause permanent damage and therefore lasers should not be used as toys. Although a direct hit into the eyes of a pilot is unlikely, she agreed that the distraction is problematic, and

asked the question: "Would you like to be a passenger in an aircraft where the pilot is momentarily blinded by a laser during landing?"

Mr Thwala emphasised that the Police and the judiciary system see these incidents in a serious light; however the difficulty lies in apprehending the perpetrators. The CAA's awareness campaign will promote public awareness, which in turn could lead to the arrest of those involved in irresponsible laser-beaming incidents.

**-ENDS-**

***About the SACAA:***

The South African Civil Aviation Authority ("SACAA") is a juristic body established in terms of the Civil Aviation Act, 2009 (Act No. 13 of 2009) ("the Act"). SACAA is governed and controlled by the Civil Aviation Authority Board ("the Board"). In terms of mandate, the SACAA is tasked with promoting and maintaining a safe, secure and sustainable civil aviation environment, by regulating and overseeing the functioning and development of the industry in an efficient, cost-effective, and customer-friendly manner according to international standards.

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