

MEDIA STATEMENT

03 June 2014

The CAA sets the record straight on Unmanned Aircraft Systems

Midrand, Johannesburg, 03-06-2014.

The South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA) wishes to put the record straight regarding the use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), or so called drones, in South Africa.

Reports that suggest that the SACAA has recently issued a notice banning the use of unmanned aircraft systems specifically in the film industry are beset with inaccuracies. It remains unclear whether these inaccuracies are deliberate or not.

The fact is that, since its inception, the SACAA has never issued any specific notice or regulation banning the use of unmanned aircraft systems. It should also be noted that the SACAA has not given any concession or approval to any organisation, individual, institution or government entity to operate UAS within the civil aviation airspace. Those that are flying any type of unmanned aircraft are doing so illegally.

Having noticed an upsurge in the number of entities and individual disregarding applicable civil aviation rules, the SACAA issued a media statement, 02 April 2014, informing individuals and/or organisations that are already operating UAS in the South African civil aviation airspace; that they are doing so illegally.

This media statement was met with an unexpected positive response, particularly from the majority of professional aviators and official organisations representing the individuals and entities with vested interest in the UAS sector. A common message that resonated from these stakeholders was their eagerness to comply with applicable laws and where necessary to work hand-in-hand with the SACAA in order to take the UAS forward.

On the other hand, the media statement was met with misguided hostility. There were also attempt to reduce the SACAA's safety and security concern to a debate between UAS and toys that general not require any operating permission from any government agency.

The SACAA also observed that there was a small group of individual who, on the surface, do not have an understanding of the aviation sector and how it is regulated.

Likewise, there is a group that on reading the media statement, decided to take a hostile stance and resort to arm-twisting tactics that included the spreading of inaccurate statement in an attempt to garner support from the media and the public for their cause. These tactics are regrettable and futile; as the SACAA certainly does not grant regulatory approvals through media or any other public channels. There are long standing channels and avenues (agreed upon by the regulator and industry representatives) that reputable aviation personnel and entities would use in order source individual or regulatory approvals.

It is also very disconcerting to note that there are individuals or organisations that are prepared to put profits before aviation safety. If the SACAA was to put profits ahead of safety; South Africa would certainly not have the longstanding admirable safety record in the commercial operations sector.

Notwithstanding, the SACAA has every intention to help develop the country's aviation sector, especially the UAS sector.

Notwithstanding, it should be noted that the unmanned aircraft systems sector constitute a relatively new component of the civil aviation framework; one which the SACAA, together with civil aviation authorities worldwide and under the guidance of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), is working to understand, define and ultimately integrate into the civil aviation sector.

Further, it is worth noting that South Africa, as an ICAO member state, is actively involved in the ICAO Unmanned Aircraft Systems Study Group to develop guidance material and standards to guide contracting states in the development of their national guidance material and regulations. As such, ICAO is working towards providing a regulatory framework through Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs), with supporting Procedures for Air Navigation Services (PANS) and guidance material, to underpin routine operation of UAS in a safe, harmonised and seamless manner comparable to that of manned operations.

The SACAA is cognisant of the urgent need and demand for UAS implementation for commercial and many other reasons. It is for this reason that the SACAA has allocated the necessary resources to the UAS programme to ensure a speedy integration of this type of aircraft into the South African airspace. In addition, the SACAA is currently compiling an interim guidance document as a provisional solution to enable restricted operational approval on a case-by-case basis, until maturity is attained by both the industry and the SACAA. There has been some significant progress made in this regard, and the SACAA has undertaken to have the document ready before the end of the current financial year, i.e. 31 March 2015. Engagement with industry representatives will continue and the SACAA will remain receptive to any input from role players.

The SACAA wishes to reiterate that the lack of regulations to administer unmanned aircraft system is a global challenge.. Notwithstanding, there is ongoing and collective global research in this area to overcome this deficiency. South Africa is an integral part of this process.

As much as the SACAA is enthusiastic about the integration of UAS into the civilian airspace, all role-players need to be mindful of various security and safety aspects. Key among these is the need to ensure that the technology installed on UAS is able to detect and avoid incidents and accidents. There is also a need to develop robust standards that will ensure separation from other aircraft or objects. Likewise, an allocated frequency spectrum needs to be secure in order to provide protection from unintentional or unlawful interference with the UAS.

It is disappointing that those who are determined to turn a blind eye to potential catastrophic hazards that unmanned aircraft systems have. Let alone the evidence that continue to be gathered by the various civil aviation authorities around the world, a simple internet search attest to the potential dangers of unmanned aircraft systems. Moreover, there is growing evidence that indicate that the territories that rushed to have unmanned aircraft systems introduced to their airspaces without proper regulation in place are now battling with ensuring safety in the sector. They are undated with incidents that border on aviation catastrophes. The SACAA has always believed that commercial or other gains should not be pushed ahead of realistic potential loss of life, intentional or otherwise.

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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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