

**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**Civil Aviation Authority concerned about recent spate of aircraft accidents**

**Midrand, Johannesburg – 19 February 2014.** The South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA) is concerned about the recent spate of aircraft accidents, which have claimed the lives of eleven (11) individuals since the beginning of the year.

All these accidents, which were reported between 1 January 2014 and 18 February 2014, occurred in the general aviation, and not the scheduled commercial airlines sector. The general aviation sector consists mainly of privately-owned small aircraft as well as recreational aircraft.

Six (6) of the fatal accidents, with an equal number of fatalities, happened in January. The three (3) fatal accidents reported since the beginning of February, have claimed (five) 5 lives. An additional twenty-two (22) non-fatal serious aircraft incidents and accidents were reported with twelve (12) occurring in January, and ten (10) in February.

“We express our condolences to those who have lost their loved ones. The SACAA is seriously concerned about the high number of accidents and fatalities that have taken place since the start of the year. The numbers are significantly higher compared to, for instance, the same period in the last two years. Whilst we await the outcome of the investigations into the causes of the accidents, we would like to remind each and every member of the aviation community that safety is paramount and is an obligation that cannot be delegated. Every aviator, in his or her respective role, is in one way or another responsible for flight safety,” said Ms Poppy Khoza, SACAA’s newly appointed Director of Civil Aviation.

In January 2012, there was one (1) fatal accident that claimed the lives of two (2) people. In February of the same year, three (3) fatal accidents were reported, resulting in the loss of three (3) lives. In 2013, the numbers were slightly higher, but nowhere near what has been witnessed thus far this year. Six (6) people lost their lives from the four (4) fatal accidents reported in February 2013.

“On average there are about 20 fatal aircraft accidents per year, resulting in an average of 40 fatalities per annum. A further scrutiny of the statistics illustrates that despite a spike totalling 92 in 2008, there has been a steady decrease from 176 in 2006 to 22 in 2013, culminating in a 7% average annual decline in accidents. Whilst the number of accidents has been declining over the years, we as the SACAA and the aviation community cannot take solace in statistics, as one life lost is just one too many,” said Khoza.

Data indicates that almost all fatal accidents in South Africa occur in the general aviation sector. “Therefore it would be inaccurate to conclude that South African skies are generally unsafe, as the reality is that our country’s commercial activities, i.e. large scheduled commercial operations, are among the safest in the world,” Khoza emphasised.

According to Khoza, accidents are caused by various systematic weaknesses and/or deficiencies. “This means that embarking on a single panacea in an attempt to reduce aircraft accidents would be futile. It is for this reason that the SACAA developed the Cross-Functional Accident Reduction Plan (CFARP) that aims to reduce accidents in the general aviation sector, in a coordinated manner,” explained Khoza.

The solutions mapped out in CFARP are based on quantitative and qualitative inputs from within and outside the SACAA. The plan, which will be implemented within two years and is subject to on-going review, deals with systematic inherent weaknesses in addressing the causes of aircraft accidents.

“This multi-disciplinary approach is crucial in addressing safety, as the ‘Swiss Cheese Model’ illustrates how various weaknesses, when aligned, will eventually cause an accident. Further, when compiling this plan, we had to ask a simple but pertinent question, i.e. whether accidents are caused by man or machine. In this instance, statistics illustrate that factors related to piloting present the single most common cause of accidents. It is thus logical to ensure that a significant part of our efforts to reduce accidents are directed at ‘human error’ challenges faced by pilots,” Khoza explained.

Having determined that human factors pose a major aviation safety hazard, the CFARP also looked into which categories of pilots are responsible in terms of experience. “Data from serious incident and accident investigation reports between 2006 and 2012 indicate that pilots with fewer than 500 flying hours are responsible for most accidents. Although data within the first 500 hours could not be broken down further at this stage; for example, according to licence holders, it stands to reason that the lower the hours, the more likely an accident would be; although that is not always the case,” Khoza said.

According to Khoza, the CFARP will, among other things, endeavour to maximise the development of pilot airmanship. “This initiative will focus on pilots’ knowledge, skills and attitude. The International Civil Aviation Organisation’s document on personnel licensing (*July 2011 edition*) identifies airmanship as ‘the consistent use of good judgement and well developed-knowledge, skills and attitudes to accomplish flight objectives’.”

Khoza revealed that regarding knowledge, more could be done in terms of coordination and continued education for pilots, particularly for those with low flying hours and/or operating under hazardous conditions. In relation to skills factors, the Plan seeks to improve pilot competency development within the training environment. “The SACAA will be intensifying its oversight role over pilot training schools, as the schools are ultimately directly responsible for pilot training and development. It has become apparent that the entry requirements for the approval of training schools are wide open; and this appears to have contributed to the establishment of training schools approximately ten times the number of those in other developed countries. Further interrogation is required, as it is not the intention of the SACAA to discourage growth, but to ensure that in as much as we have a large number of training schools; all systems must be effective in order to facilitate healthy aviation safety practices,” explained Khoza.

Another concern that the recently finalised Cross-Functional Accident Reduction Plan has revealed is the complete reliance on instructors with low flying experience to develop aspiring pilots. “Historically, commercial pilot’s licence-holders with low hours often opt to teach prospective pilots in order to obtain enough flying hours as required for their airline transport licence. Our view is that it is indeed crucial to ensure adequate pilot feed into the system; however, this need must be balanced with expert training by adequately experienced pilot instructors. We believe that this will positively enhance all the requisite airmanship factors among student pilots. The criterion in this regard is still to be determined. However, there are valuable lessons that can be learnt from military pilot training methods,” Khoza elaborated.

In relation to factors affecting the underdevelopment of pilot attitudes, the SACAA is contemplating, amongst others, the introduction of a standardised induction programme for all student pilots. “The aim is to ensure appropriate induction of prospective pilots, leading to the adoption of positive attitudes and discipline. At the moment it is up to the aviation training organisations to instil appropriate and adequate airmanship. It can thus be deduced that the airmanship attitudes of prospective students are moulded by the respective instructors,” said Khoza.

She further said that the Regulator has also noted the overreliance on aviation training organisations during pilot development, particularly at the private pilot's licence entry point. "Whilst this is not uncommon, further process enhancement is necessary. At this point, the SACAA does not directly verify the claimed proficiency of any of the pilot candidates, as these are examined through designated flight examiners that do not form part of the regulatory authority. Direct testing of pilots, at least on a sample basis, is being contemplated in order to determine trends concerning aviation training organisations.

"In the meantime, the SACAA will continue to be vigilant to ensure proper conduct by all training organisations and aviators. The Authority will continue to collaborate with the industry in order to consistently provide solutions that would ensure that South Africa's general aviation sector ultimately ranks among the safest in the world. This would require pragmatic pursuing of the SACAA's vision and execution of our mandate without fear or favour, however being receptive to industry inputs is critical in order to achieve a common goal. Continuous and honest introspection will also form the hallmark of our pursuit for a safer airspace.

"With all that having been said, our standing with organisations such as the International Civil Aviation Organisation as well as the current facts and figures indicates that South African incident and accident trends are far better than those of other developing and developed countries. It is our commitment that the Regulator, in partnership with the industry, will work tirelessly to ensure that the situation does not become worse but that it improves for the better," Khoza concluded.

**-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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