

# Lack of capital, inexperience to blame for air accidents in Africa, say experts

**SAFETY:** Most of the 160 accidents in Africa between 1994 and 2003 involved non-scheduled operators

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**I**mported old aircraft, loopholes in licensing of air operators, lack of autonomy for civil aviation authorities and inexperienced pilots are to blame for the high rates of aircraft accidents in Africa.

A regional summit on Airline Safety Enhancement Team summit in Nairobi last week, was told that over 50 per cent of all accidents occur in Africa.

The two-day summit, whose aim was to discuss the causes of high accident rates on the continent, brought together African Civil Aviation professionals, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) safety department and major industry players.

According to the African Airlines Association (Afraa), commuter airlines and air taxis, which largely operate non-scheduled services, are the worst hit. These carry less than 30 passengers and are not subjected to the same rigorous safety regulations as the larger aircrafts.

Between 1994 and 2003, 210 accidents were reported globally, out of which 160 were in Africa, mainly involving aircraft in non-scheduled operations that include cargo, charter and ad-hoc services.

Afraa secretary general Christian Folly-Kossi said that most of the non-scheduled airlines are in most cases flown by either young and inexperienced pilots or by pilots nearing retirement.

"Experienced pilots are attracted to the larger scheduled operators where there are greater prospects for promotion," he said. "Hence there are more accidents involving commuter aircraft than the larger types."

In addition, Africa lends itself to



From left: Afraa secretary general Christian Folly-Kossi, Kenya Airways managing director Titus Naikuni and the airline's finance director Neil Cauty at a cocktail after the Nairobi summit. Picture Anthony Kamau

adventure flying mostly by tourists from Europe, who mostly fly at low altitudes watching game and other natural attractions often using commuter aircraft. These also contribute to accidents in the African skies.

Afraa statistics show that seven out of the 21 accidents in 2003 involving aircraft occurred in Africa. This accounts for a third of all the accidents in the global aviation industry.

**I**mported old aircraft account for only 3 per cent of world aircraft departures, yet they have the highest accident rates in the world.

Speaking at the summit, Kenya Airways managing director Titus Naikuni said that high rate of accidents might see Africa losing to Western carriers in the global aviation markets.

"High accident rates can easily deter people from flying, this statistical feature of the African skies might be used by ill-intentioned parties as weapons of destructive competition against the successful

African carriers," Mr Naikuni said.

Shortage of resources by most African countries has worsened the situation. The poor state of African economies is demonstrated by small sizes of airlines fleets, with Afraa estimations of average fleet size at between four and 10 in Africa.

This lack of capital for most African airlines has seen many failing to fit some equipment that are critical to flight safety. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) in its audit reports has found cases of some airlines not conforming with its set standards.

ICAO has been carrying out

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regular safety audits of regulations, procedures and communication, navigation, surveillance/air traffic management systems in African states.

**F**or instance, some airlines have been found to be without an airborne collision avoidance system (ACAS), a device used to alert an aircraft of the presence of another one in its vicinity, thus increasing risks of accidents.

According to aviation sources, only the new aircraft, mostly owned by the large airlines have fitted these equipment, possibly because they fly to Europe or the US, where it is mandatory.

At the country level, the civil aviation authorities carry out safety oversights in the aviation industry on behalf of ICAO.

Incidentally, many CAAs in Africa operate as government outfits and in many cases are understaffed and unmotivated. This has resulted into inadequate safety oversights on airline activities in some countries.