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Kenya Airways CEO
Allan Kilavuka
IMAGE: IATA

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PARTNERSHIP DANCE IN FULL SWING

Very soon now, one of Africa's longest airline courtships is expected to be consummated with Qatar Airways finalising its 49 per cent equity investment in RwandAir.

Qatar is further bound to Rwanda's air transport fortunes via its 60 per cent stake in building the New Kigali International Airport. Rwanda's bold national development vision puts airline, airport and aviation services development at the heart of the mission. This is spelt out in our country report on pages 24-34.

Qatar's strategy is to take stakes in airlines in geographically-important regions, such as Rwanda and in South Africa via its 25 per cent acquisition of AirlinK in August 2024.

□ □ □ □ □

Emirates does not need financial stakes to project its business muscle into Africa. It already serves 22 African airports and its extensive codeshare and interline partnerships mean its footprint expands to more than 210 regional points.

Etihad too is targeting Africa, but is playing catch-up to

its more established Gulf rivals. A significant deal for the Abu Dhabi-based carrier came in March in a joint venture, non-equity, pact with Ethiopian Airlines. This sees both carriers beginning services between Addis Ababa and Abu Dhabi.

Each of the big three Gulf carriers is advancing as fast as possible into Africa. Despite restrictive bilateral agreements only offering limited market access in some countries, their ability to Hoover traffic to the Gulf and beyond swamps that of most African airlines.

□ □ □ □ □

How do African carriers respond? The first stop begins at home by creating a strong domestic and regional network. This clearly makes good business sense and makes them attractive from the inevitable gaze of players to the east.

The adage 'if you can't beat them, join them' applies for many, and in a game where scale counts, few African players have it.

And there is another country – Saudi Arabia – whose airlines haven't got going yet in Africa, but they will.

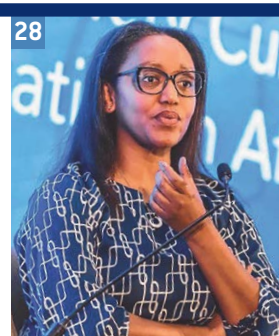
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ETHIOPIAN'S DOMESTIC BOOST WITH TWO TWIN OTTER 300-Gs



IMAGE: DE HAVILLAND AIRCRAFT CANADA

Ethiopian Airlines has signed a purchase agreement for two Twin Otter 300-G aircraft from De Havilland Aircraft Canada. It marks the introduction of the 300-G into Ethiopian Airlines' fleet.

"The addition of the Twin Otter 300-G to our fleet reflects our strategy to expand domestic connectivity and support socio-economic growth in Ethiopia and across Africa," said Mesfin Tasew, group CEO of Ethiopian Airlines.

The new order comes two years after De Havilland launched the new Twin Otter Classic 300-G variant. The aircraft comes fitted with Garmin G1000 NXi avionics and a choice of Pratt & Whitney Canada PT6A-27 or -34 turboprop engines.

Uganda training

The Uganda Civil Aviation Authority (UCAA) has signed an agreement with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to collaborate on and develop a training scheme.

The agreement is expected to bring multiple benefits to Uganda's aviation sector, making it more competitive, promoting economic development and generating employment opportunities.

Through ICAO's Global Aviation Training (GAT) section, the partnership will see the establishment of a department within UCAA to assess training gaps and needs and develop a long-term training plan.

EgyptAir options

EgyptAir exercised its outstanding six options for Airbus A350-900s during this year's Paris Airshow.

The carrier will begin receiving the first of 10 A350-900s in December this year, but decided to



IMAGE: AIR PEACE

Air Peace gets go-ahead for Heathrow services

Nigerian carrier Air Peace has been given the green light to commence direct flights between Abuja and London Heathrow from October 26.

Since launching UK operations in March 2024, Air Peace has been operating flights into London Gatwick, but has had its eyes on operating to London Heathrow.

Last September, Nigeria's minister of aviation and aerospace development, Festus Keyamo, wrote a letter to the UK aviation authorities requesting slots for Air Peace at Heathrow, which was initially rejected citing the applications were

submitted too late for the scheduling seasons.

"On the international scene, daily flights from Lagos to London are going on, so we'll start from October, and from then on, we will start Abuja-London flights as the British Authority has granted Air Peace access to Heathrow directly," said chairman of Air Peace, Dr Allen Onyema.

He added: "We shall be running seven days a week, that is, four days to Heathrow and three days to Gatwick Airport from Abuja. If you are not good, foreign airlines won't allow you to fly there commercially."

upgrade the options into firm orders to ensure it has a strong delivery stream of widebodies into the early 2030s.

"With everything that's happening with the supply chain and the demand that's very high on all types of aircraft, widebodies and

narrowbodies, we decided to exercise the options to be on track with our fleet renovation," said captain Ahmed Adel, chairman.

The airline will take a further six A350-900s in 2026 with the final three from its original firm order arriving by 2030.

Save the data

Acron Aviation has signed a multi-year contract with Air Cairo to provide a fully-outsourced flight data monitoring (FDM) service based on its industry-leading flight data connect (FDC) platform.

The service will cover the entire Air Cairo fleet that includes ATR, Embraer and Airbus aircraft types.

Captain Ahmed Shanan, chairman and CEO, Air Cairo, said: "Their platform stood out for its depth of analytics, speed of insight, and adaptability to our specific operational needs."

Klas connection

Corporate jet charter company KlasJet has signed an agreement with Air Cairo to provide chartered flights this summer.

The agreement sees KlasJet operate charter flights for Air Cairo, taking holidaymakers from Milan and Sharjah to Cairo. The contract started on May 30, 2025 and will run until October 31.

The partnership between Air Cairo and KlasJet is helping meet an upsurge in tourism.

In the period from July to September last year, tourism revenue hit \$4.8bn, a significant uplift for Africa's second-largest economy.

Bell signs first SUBARU Bell 412EPX order in Africa



Bell Textron has signed a purchase agreement for 12 SUBARU Bell 412EPXs to the Tunisian Air Force, marking the first order for this Bell 412 variant in the region.

The aircraft will be used for multi-role military and security missions. The Tunisian military has expanded its rotary wing fleet of 39 Bell aircraft, including Bell UH-1s, 205s and OH-58s.

"The Bell 412 is one of the most trusted platforms globally, and we are honoured to support the Tunisian Air Force as it expands its fleet with this proven and versatile aircraft," said Tim Evans, Bell's managing director for Middle East and Africa.

EgyptAir Trent deal

EgyptAir has ordered six additional Trent XWB-84 engines from Rolls-Royce.

This latest order, which will power six Airbus A350-900 aircraft, brings EgyptAir's total commitment to the Trent XWB-84 engine to 32 units.

As part of this strategic partnership, Rolls-Royce will provide comprehensive maintenance and health services for the engines through its renowned TotalCare service, ensuring optimal performance and reliability for EgyptAir's operations.

Réunion union

Madagascar Airlines and Air Austral have entered a codeshare agreement and a special prorate agreement, marking a decisive step in the revival of their commercial cooperation.

The partnership aims to strengthen connectivity between Madagascar, Réunion, and other regional and international destinations, while

expanding fare options and travel opportunities for customers of both airlines.

Sitting pretty

Acro Aircraft Seating has been selected to supply FlySafair with multiple shipsets of its series nine fixed-back seats.

The new seats will be fitted on FlySafair's fleet of

Boeing 737s with a planned delivery from Acro at the end of 2025.

The series nine has been specifically designed to meet the rigorous demands of both low-cost and full-service carriers flying short-medium haul routes.

Kirby Gordon, chief marketing officer at FlySafair, said: "These seats

stood out for their comfort, quality, and thoughtful design, while also offering the benefit of being lightweight."

Tasew award

Ethiopian Airlines Group CEO, Mesfin Tasew, was honoured in June with the prestigious Ato Girma Wake lifetime achievement award

for outstanding contribution to route development and African aviation.

The recognition celebrates Tasew's years of contribution, and continuing impact on the airline's success.

He said: "This award is more than an honour as it is named after Africa's father of aviation, Ethiopian Airlines' former CEO and my mentor."

Tanzania concerns

The European Commission has added Tanzania to the EU Air Safety List – the list of airlines that are subject to an operating ban or operational restrictions within the European Union because they do not meet international safety standards.

The European Commission said the decision in Tanzania was the identified safety shortcomings covering both operational and regulatory areas.

Following the update, a total of 169 airlines are banned from EU skies.



IMAGE: TAAG ANGOLA AIRLINES

TAAG transfers all international flights to new airport

It's a big change for TAAG Angola Airlines as it prepares to fully transfer its operations from Luanda's 4 de Fevereiro International Airport to Dr. António Agostinho Neto International Airport from September 15, 2025.

This new airport infrastructure will now accommodate higher traffic international flights, specifically to Lisbon, São Paulo, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Lagos, Windhoek, São Tome, and Maputo, which join the domestic and regional

destinations of Brazzaville and Kinshasa already based at the new airport.

The decision to transfer TAAG's international flight operations to Dr. António Agostinho Neto International Airport follows an Executive Decree and reflects the strategic vision of the Government of Angola to position Luanda/Icolo e Bengo as a hub and gateway for people and goods across the African continent and for North-South and East-West connections worldwide.

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Having overseen Kenya Airways' first profit for a decade, chief executive Allan Kilavuka is turning his attention to securing long-term financial sustainability. Graham Dunn reports from Nairobi.

ALLAN'S KEY TO RESTORING PRIDE

After Kenya Airways disclosed its first net profit for more than a decade at the end of March, its chief executive Allan Kilavuka could be forgiven for reflecting on a tough job achieved.

After all, Kilavuka, who formally took the helm of the carrier in early 2020, just as the pandemic hit, has spent much of the past five years fighting a rearguard action. That was not just in the face of the Covid crisis, which crippled the whole air transport sector, but also the underlying challenges at Kenya Airways, which has seen it in restructuring mode for much of the last 10 years.

However, despite the profit return, Kilavuka is aware the restructuring of the carrier is far from complete.

"It's a big milestone," Kilavuka acknowledged, speaking to *African Aerospace* on the sidelines of IATA's Ground Handling Conference in Nairobi during mid-May – notably the first time the event has been held on the continent in its 37-year history.

Kenya Airways posted a net profit of KSh5.4 billion (US\$41.5m) for the year ending 31 December 2024, turning around a loss of KSh22.7 billion (US\$180m) as the first phase of its Project Kifaru restructuring efforts paid dividend. That was driven by a six per cent rise in turnover to KSh188m (US\$1.46b) while passenger numbers increased four per cent to 5.2 million and cargo volumes up a quarter.

"To be completely honest, it's a bit better than we expected," Kilavuka said. "Last year we made the highest profit in the history of the company, the highest revenues, the highest number of passengers.

"But we are not done yet," he added.

Kilavuka, a former GE and Deloitte executive, had been running Kenya Airways' budget airline Jambojet since December 2018 when the call came to take charge of the wider group.

Still the Pride of Africa? A Kenya Airways Boeing 787.

IMAGE: MARK HANKIN, WIKIPEDIA.



Kenya Airways – which has the strapline 'The Pride of Africa' – had for many years been something of a poster child for African aviation; having enjoyed modest, but stable profitability, being among the first in the region to join a global alliance in the shape of SkyTeam and securing investment from Dutch carrier KLM. However, as it expanded, the carrier began running into financial challenges and has been hampered by legacy costs and debts since.

Kilavuka set about resetting the business, striving to improve the airline's fundamentals and its operations under its Kifaru restructuring programme. It struck fresh labour deals to boost productivity, optimised its fleet and network, and reached agreements with lessors and suppliers to lower its cost base.

But while Kilavuka could point to improvement in the underlying performance of the business – Kenya Airways recorded an operating profit in 2023 – fuel price volatility and foreign exchange losses continued to stifle the airline's net result until last year's record performance.

Capital key

In another sign of Kenya Airways' stabilisation, the financial recovery also paved the way for trading in the carrier's shares to resume on the Nairobi Stock Exchange in January. Trading in Kenya Airways shares had been suspended for more than four years amid Covid and after the government floated the idea – which it subsequently dropped – of nationalising Kenya Airways.

However, if the results last year – which were supported by a stable currency and a more benign fuel price environment – are better than Kilavuka may have dared hope, progress is still needed on the next step towards the carrier's long-term financial sustainability.

"Now we have to capitalise the business," Kilavuka said. "In fact, our original plan was that by 2024 we would have fresh capital, and that fresh capital was supposed to help us to expand and do some Cap Ex, so refurbishing of the aircraft, engines and so on. And we are late.

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on Page 10

**“We need to densify
Africa, there are
many gaps in Africa
we need to fill.”**

ALLAN KILAVUKA
IMAGE: IATA



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“For us to recapitalise we have to get approvals from our shareholders and our principle shareholder [the Kenyan government] is yet to give us the express approval,” he explained. “In the meantime we are doing it informally as we wait for the approvals. We have a few leads that are looking very promising, but nothing yet that we are able to announce. We hope that this year we will be able to announce an investor.”

Securing a strategic investor is also vital to the carrier being able to meet its longer-term goals, which include ambitions to double revenue and passenger numbers by 2030. “The plan for the next five years is the airline will increase its fleet, from 34 to close to 60 – including widebody cargo aircraft,” he said. “So, there is a concern in terms of the pace of the capitalisation.”

That task is made even harder given the challenge airlines globally face in securing aircraft, both with supply chain issues hitting availability and affordability today and delivery dates for new aircraft at a time where manufacturer backlogs are booked out for the coming years.

“This plan is subject to availability of aircraft,” Kilavuka said, “which currently we don’t have availability. In fact, it [the availability] is worse than it was when we set up the plan. And the fact we have not been able to recapitalise means we cannot place the orders just yet. So, this is why it’s important for us to get the approvals and then we can announce our plans and place our orders.”

STRATEGIC PLAN

Kilavuka says the airline has a plan approved by the board, which would need to be validated by any new strategic investor, which envisages adding aircraft next year. “But once we have the strategic investor, we will actually place orders for brand new aircraft from the OEMs. That’s next year. So, we would have clarity on how exactly the 2030 vision will roll out.”

The airline operates a passenger jet fleet of Embraer 190s, Boeing 737-800s and Boeing 787 Dreamliners. Kilavuka said it would be looking at both narrowbody and widebody aircraft as part of a new fleet order.

A further plank of the strategic growth plan is diversifying by growing its cargo activity to 20 per cent of its overall business. The airline added two Boeing 737-800 freighters last year, helping it boost cargo tonnage 25 per cent in 2024 with notable expansion of services in the Middle East.

Kilavuka says the first step in meeting its cargo aspirations is to better use its existing assets. The two 737-800s joined the carrier’s two existing 737-300 freighters.

But the airline is also looking at bringing in widebody freighters as part of its cargo development. “We are looking at Boeing 767-300s, two of them, and to use the belly [space] more efficiently and hopefully we are able to expand next year,” Kilavuka said.

During 2024, Kenya Airways restored flights to Maputo in Mozambique, while also adding flights to the Somalia capital Mogadishu and

domestic services to Eldoret. But Kilavuka sees far more potential to connect Africa.

“We need to densify Africa, there are many gaps in Africa we need to fill,” Kilavuka said. “For example, we don’t fly to Gaborone, we don’t fly to Windhoek in Namibia. There are very many cities we don’t fly to. We need to densify the network, that’s the opportunity because we are a network airline.”

One network opportunity the carrier is looking at progressing in West Africa is Accra in Ghana, where Kilavuka discussed the possibility of Kenya Airways establishing a secondary hub during an early May meeting with Ghana president John Dramani Mahama.

“Then we have lots of opportunity in Asia, particularly India and China. We fly to those places, but there are opportunities for different cities as well.” Kenya Airways currently serves Mumbai and Guangzhou respectively, as well as the Thai capital Bangkok.

The carrier will add a second London operation in July, when it begins services from Nairobi’s Jomo Kenyatta International airport to Gatwick. Kenya already serves Heathrow daily.

The carrier has begun codesharing on the Heathrow route and beyond with recent SkyTeam recruit, Virgin Atlantic. It also serves Paris Charles de Gaulle and Amsterdam Schiphol in Europe, the respective hubs of SkyTeam partners Air France and KLM.

“In Europe we only fly to three places, and we use the network of our partners airlines to fly, but we have opportunities to exploit. Istanbul is a very attractive one,” Kilavuka said.

Kenya Airways, which also serves Dubai and New York JFK internationally, also recently reiterated its interest in potential services to Mexico.

“There are many, many opportunities. We just have to roll them out very systematically, so we don’t overheat as well,” said Kilavuka.

Crucially, Kenya Airways is also seeking to tap into partners to develop this connectivity, particularly within Africa. However, there has

Allan Kilavuka:
“There are many, many opportunities. We just have to roll them out very systematically, so we don’t overheat.”

IMAGE: IATA



been little headway in a mooted wider link-up with South African Airways.

Kenya Airways had tentatively teamed up on a partnership initiative with SAA in 2021 with a view to potentially creating a pan-African airline holding company. But after agreeing an initial codeshare, and with both carriers working through restructuring efforts, this appears to have gained little traction.

“I have to admit that we have had little progress,” said Kilavuka, noting this is unfortunate given that Kenya Airways is now “ready to move” having finished the first stage of its restructuring.

Intriguingly, Kilavuka was himself linked with the top job at SAA earlier this year as the state-owned carrier sought to appoint a full-time CEO. In the end, South African transport minister Barbara Creecy confirmed she had opted to re-appoint John Lamola to the SAA CEO role.

With little movement on a wider partnership with SAA, Kenya Airways has in the meantime identified other opportunities within Africa. “The whole point is how we utilise our assets, how we expand inorganically using each other’s assets,” said Kilavuka. “We are identifying, even if they are less formal, partnerships and we see a lot of opportunities for us to utilise our assets collectively better.”

And Kilavuka is in no doubt of the need to grow in scale. “We definitely need to be bigger,” he said. “Because the smaller you are, the higher the unit cost. For us, we would spread out our fixed costs to a larger operation.”

“We therefore need to expand,” Kilavuka said. “And we can either expand organically or inorganically through partnerships. So, we choose partnerships as a faster way to expand.”

GROWTH HURDLES

During a press conference at IGHC in Nairobi, IATA director general Willie Walsh flagged the strong performance of traffic growth in African aviation since the pandemic.

“If we look at where Africa is today versus 2019, it’s about 14 per cent, 15 per cent ahead of where it was, which I think is a significant development and points to the opportunity that exists in Africa,” he said.

Kilavuka, however, notes that this growth remains off a low base and believes governments in the region need to do more to enable Africa’s “fragmented” aviation sector to prosper.

“It is important for us to grow aviation and to grow it fast,” he said. “Governments in Africa

need to address the challenges and the obstacles that are put in front of aviation players, including very high taxes in Africa and the related costs that translate to high ticket prices.

“That is why it is very difficult for African operators to be efficient because of these obstacles and also there is inferior infrastructure,” he said, noting the need to update airports and air traffic control systems in the region. ▲



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Inside ACSA CEO Mpumi Mpofu's vision for Africa's smartest airport network. **Chloe Greenbank** reports.

Mpofu's breath of fresh airports

Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) might have faced public scrutiny in recent years with reports of operational challenges, including fuel shortages, financial woes and service disruptions, but today it's a different story. Under strong leadership and enhanced operations ACSA is proving itself a resilient force in the aviation industry.

"ACSA is thriving and we're embarking on a new era," Mpumi Mpofu, the state-owned airport operator's CEO told *African Aerospace*.

"This year marks the end of our recovery phase following the Covid-19 pandemic and the beginning of our strategy to innovate, grow and sustain."

Pointing to the earnings for the financial year 23/24 Mpofu notes they marked the first year the state-owned entity has recorded a profit – R472 million (US\$26.2m) – since the pandemic.

Mpofu was appointed CEO for ACSA in 2020 amid the upheaval of the global pandemic. Her professional background spans 25 years in the fields of transport, infrastructure development, local government and town, urban and regional planning.

She was also the leader of the Government Transport Plan for the FIFA World Cup 2010 overseeing ACSA's airport development programme for 2010 and was instrumental in the development of the South African Airlift Strategy and the National Airports Infrastructure Strategic Framework.

Since joining ACSA she has continued to make her mark as one of Africa's most prominent aviation leaders and is now tasked with steering the company through a period of growth.

ACSA's three major airports — OR Tambo International (Johannesburg), Cape Town International, and King Shaka International (Durban) — collectively have a capacity of around 50 million passengers annually. Mpofu is on a mission to transform these airports and

their regional counterparts into dynamic, interconnected hubs that support not only passenger travel but also trade, tourism, and industrial growth.

As "Africa's best performing airport network", ACSA plays a crucial role in the evolution of the continent's aviation sector. "We see ourselves not just as South Africa's airports, but as gateways to the entire continent," Mpofu said.

Last year marked a "phenomenal" turnaround for the South African airport operator. Like many in the aviation industry ACSA faced unprecedented operational and financial setbacks due to the Covid pandemic. Passenger numbers plunged by more than 80 per cent, prompting a radical recalibration.

"From 2020 we experienced a steep financial decline," recalled Mpofu. "We faced significant losses – R2.5bn (US\$140m) in that first year, which we reduced to R1.5bn (US\$83m) in the second year, R1bn (US\$56m) in the third and R446m (US\$24.8m) in 2023."



Having adjusted operations in response to reduced passenger traffic, implemented cost containment measures and paused non-essential projects, the turning point for ACSA came last year with the company reporting a profit of R472m (US\$26.27m).

Central to ACSA's ambitious growth is its R21bn (US\$1.17bn) capital investment program. The funding marks the largest infrastructure investment since the 2010 FIFA World Cup preparations.

According to Mpofu: "Seventy per cent of this investment will be allocated to refurbishment, rehabilitation and maintenance projects across ACSA's airport network – including the upgrade of terminals, facilities and systems."

A key element of this CAPEX investment is demand-driven planning. "In line with the Public Finance Management Act (PMFA), ACSA is obliged to go to tender on every project it instigates," stated Mpofu. She revealed that to expedite the process ACSA has taken strategic steps to prepare projects ahead of time. So, although legally the company cannot sign contracts or spend funding outside the designated financial year, it has front-loaded the procurement process as much as possible to ensure no time is lost when the relevant budget cycle begins.

"Around 70 per cent of these project pipelines has already gone through procurement, so once the financial year begins, implementation can start immediately."

Mpofu also noted that to avoid "white elephant" projects, ACSA adheres to a seven-year timeline which relies on traffic demand forecasts. "It's about using resources efficiently and maintaining and repurposing what we have. If new infrastructure is not required in the next seven years, then we won't build it until it is needed."

An example of this prudent planning is the expansion at Cape Town International's domestic terminal, where passenger flow data clearly indicated bottlenecks during peak periods at the weekend. "Rather than overbuilding, we are cautiously expanding capacity in the domestic terminal to meet actual demand, with flexibility built in should trends shift," said Mpofu.

Underlining that modern airports are as much technology hubs as transport nodes, Mpofu added that alongside infrastructural upgrades, ACSA is investing heavily in a digital transformation to build Africa's smartest airport network.

"Technology drives efficiency, safety, and passenger experience," she said. "We're upgrading airport management systems for real-time monitoring, deploying biometric e-gates for seamless border processing, and installing



“We’re not just managing runways and terminals; we’re developing integrated precincts where commerce, innovation, and transport converge.”

MPUMI MPOFU

advanced security systems including smart detection and perimeter intrusion technology.”

Currently handling between 22 and 24 million passengers each year, Johannesburg’s OR Tambo is the focal point for these innovations. The goal is to minimise friction in passenger flows, reduce wait times, and bolster security without inconveniencing travellers.

“This approach aligns with global trends for smart airports that use data analytics, automation, and AI to optimise everything from baggage handling to facility maintenance,” added Mpofu.

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Route development is another major focus, with South Africa’s airports serving as critical hubs for international routes as well as for domestic links. “Our network development strategy is focused on increasing frequencies with existing carriers, but also looking to destinations where we think there is demand. We are exploring opportunities in Europe, North America and South America that have not previously been penetrated,” Mpofu said.

She also underlined that route development is a collective responsibility, involving government, regulatory bodies, airlines and tourism partners. “Our role as the airport operator is to collaborate with all these stakeholders while ensuring infrastructure readiness and a smooth operating environment.”

One key distinction that helps South Africa stand out, according to Mpofu, is that unlike transit-heavy hubs such as Dubai or Addis Ababa, 80 percent of traffic landing in South Africa is final destination passengers.

Emirates currently operates two daily Airbus A380 flights from Dubai to Johannesburg. “The majority of those passengers onboard are transiting through the UAE with South Africa as their destination. This

**Continued
on Page 14**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

reflects the strong demand from travellers choosing to come here.”

ACSA is analysing this demand and exploring where passengers that are transiting through Dubai originate from. The aim is to identify those regions and airlines that lack bilateral air service agreements with South Africa and to promote direct air connectivity.

To further strengthen its position on the African and global aviation scene, Mpofu is vocal in her support for open skies agreements within Africa. Describing the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) as vital for long-term growth, she said: “We advocate for liberalised air service agreements that reduce barriers and encourage competition, driving down costs and improving connectivity for passengers and cargo.”

Cargo is a growing priority for ACSA, especially with the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) aiming to boost intra-African trade. ACSA is planning a R5.7bn (US\$310m) “best-in-class” midfield cargo terminal at OR Tambo equipped with AI-driven automation – “a first for South Africa.”

“This facility will expedite customs clearance, increase capacity, and enhance cargo security,” said Mpofu. “Looking ahead, we want to attract global logistics companies and e-commerce players.”

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Non-aeronautical revenues from cargo and other sources are a vital income stream for ACSA. Unlike many airports dependent predominantly on aeronautical revenue, ACSA boasts a balanced financial model with nearly 50 per cent non-aeronautical income.

“Airports today function as mini cities,” Mpofu noted. “Our aerotropolis model transforms airport precincts into economic nodes with logistics parks, manufacturing, freight and service industries.”

This approach attracts private sector investment, creates jobs, and enhances the value of airport assets. The Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town aerotropolises are flagship projects demonstrating this vision.

“We’re not just managing runways and terminals; we’re developing integrated precincts where commerce, innovation, and transport converge.”

Beyond its three primary hubs of OR Tambo, Cape Town and King Shaka, Mpofu and ACSA’s commitment to regional airports is equally significant.

“Africa’s economic development depends on connectivity beyond the big cities. We are nearly doubling capacity at many smaller airports — from Chief David Stuurman (in Gqeberha, formerly Port Elizabeth) to George, East London, Kimberley, and Upington.”

Upgrades at these regional hubs will include terminal expansion projects, runway improvement and technology advancements to accommodate growing passenger numbers, stimulate tourism,



OLIVER TAMBO AIRPORT: “Airports today function as mini cities. Our aerotropolis model transforms airport precincts into economic nodes with logistics parks, manufacturing, freight and service industries,” says Mpumi Mpofu.

IMAGE: PRETORIA TRAVEL, WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

and unlock regional business potential while fostering inclusive economic growth. “For these smaller cities and communities, improved air connectivity can transform local economies by attracting investment, boosting tourism, and enabling regional export industries,” Mpofu noted.

“We see our regional airports as catalysts for economic diversification and community upliftment, providing access and opportunity for those living around them.”

Embracing ACSA’s planned growth and modernisation of its airport network as sustainably as possible, is more than just a PR activity for Mpofu. It is a strategic imperative. ACSA already participates in Airports Council International’s (ACI’s) Airport Carbon Accreditation (ACA) programme, with four of its nine airports advancing to level three status — a reflection of their mature carbon management.

Mpofu also pointed to ACSA’s integrated environmental, social, governance (ESG) framework encompassing environmental stewardship, social upliftment, and governance excellence. “We are embedding ESG criteria into all aspects of our operations and with all our partners, from airlines and concessionaires to cargo operators and ground handlers.”

For the communities living adjacent to the airports in ACSA’s portfolio, the operator’s socio-economic development programme targets communities within 10 km of its airports, creating jobs and fostering small business opportunities in areas like waste management and manufacturing.

Addressing the scrutiny that South Africa’s air traffic management (ATM) sector faced earlier this year, Mpofu said the situation has been exacerbated by a global shortage of qualified personnel.

“ATM is not directly managed by ACSA, but we work closely with the Department of Transport, to identify the problems impacting airport operations,” explained Mpofu. The systems at the centre of the issue are instrument flight procedures

(IFPs), which outline predetermined departure, arrival and landing manoeuvres. Managed by the air traffic and navigation services (ATNS), these procedures help ensure a safe, orderly flow of air traffic.

However, administrative shortcomings within ATNS have caused significant disruptions at several South African airports, including the temporary suspension of IFPs at some locations. ACSA’s smaller regional airports have been particularly impacted, according to Mpofu, as they are often subject to adverse weather and therefore aircraft have had to be redirected due to the lack of valid IFPs. “We’ve then had to arrange road transport to get those passengers back to their original destination,” she said. “But we’ve been cooperative to try and alleviate the disruption this causes as ultimately it’s about keeping our passengers happy,” she added.

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To build local capacity and develop a pool of skilled employees, ACSA is partnering with the University of Pretoria and aviation bodies to establish specialised aviation degrees and certifications to encourage skilled professionals to pursue a career in the sector.

“Developing homegrown talent is essential to sustaining safe, efficient airspace management,” she said, underlining her commitment to investing in human capital as a foundation for long-term operational excellence.

“We’re seeing the workforce challenge impact our entire aviation ecosystem. Skilled employees are being lured by exorbitant pay rates in destinations including the Middle East and Australia. But we must plan for this and make sure we’re training the next generation now, not wait.”

Looking ahead, Mpofu is optimistic about the future of ACSA and South Africa’s broader aviation sector. “Air connectivity,” she said, “is central to the continent’s transformation, unlocking trade, tourism, and cultural exchange. ▲

Making the link

Embraer made a major impact at the recent Paris Air Show with a batch of significant orders adding to the Brazilian manufacturer's record backlog.

Embraer announced a landmark deal at Le Bourget this year with the revelation that South African carrier Airlink is to take delivery of 10 Embraer E195-E2s from lessor Azorra as it introduces factory-new aircraft from the manufacturer's flagship E-Jet family.

"The Airlink deal is a huge milestone for Embraer as we continue to grow our footprint on the African continent. This is an absolute marquee transaction for us with our biggest operator in the region," stated Stephan Hannemann, Senior Vice-President Sales & Marketing and Head of Middle East & Africa at Embraer.

Up until now Airlink has operated mostly pre-owned aircraft, although it did acquire new ERJ135s back in 2001. Today it has a 68-aircraft strong all-Embraer fleet.

In an example of its strong partnerships with lessors, all ten aircraft are from Azorra's E195-E2 orderbook with the first delivery expected later this year and continuing through 2027.

The timing is right for Airlink, which has grown conservatively, steadily, and profitably over the past few years, to move up in size to the larger E2.

Several of Airlink's new E2s will operate in a single-class configuration with 136 seats on "Golden Triangle" routes between Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg. The rest will have 124 seats in a two-class layout for longer flights connecting South Africa to the rest of the continent.

"Airlink is the ninth largest operator of Embraer aircraft globally and there are very few carriers out there that have such a close DNA match with what we believe our value proposition is of our products," said Hannemann.

"I am talking about connectivity, frequency, new destinations, aircraft right-sizing and offering the best product to the passengers."

According to Hannemann: "The E195-E2 is going to allow Airlink to compete with larger, narrowbody aircraft on a cost per seat level. It is going to give them great flexibility to compete very efficiently on the domestic regional networks and to venture out into new markets."

Right sized for Africa

The E195-E2, and its smaller variant the E190-E2, offer "fantastic potential for Africa in terms of the capacity – they really are the right match for carriers on this African continent," said Hannemann.

"Embraer has just released a report called Connecting Africa that outlines our thoughts on creating more connectivity on the continent," he added.

Embraer identified 45 unserved nonstop intra-African routes that would offer strong business opportunities and market stimulation. "We listed the top 10 markets that you



Stephan Hannemann, Senior Vice-President Sales & Marketing and Head of Middle East & Africa at Embraer (third from the right), marks a major sales success alongside colleagues from Embraer and Azorra at the Paris Air Show (photo: Billypix).

could start flying immediately today, two times a week with a right-sized aircraft in our segment, and you would be profitable," he noted.

"Carriers cannot enter these markets with a standard narrowbody, it would be too risky, but with an E2 these routes become viable."

With 274 aircraft now in operation across Africa, making it the second strongest commercial jet OEM after Boeing, and the segment leader up to 150 seaters, Embraer has become a household name.

And it is going a step further. "Historically, Embraer has been very good in the 30 to 90 seat range starting with propeller types and then regional jets," said Jurjan Knol, VP Marketing EMEA.

"Now we are in the small, narrowbody space with the E2 competing head-to-head with Airbus A220," he said. Embraer's message to African players is that the Brazilian aircraft manufacturer has risen to become a powerful global aerospace player.

As Embraer CEO Francisco Gomes Neto said during Paris, it has delivered over 9,000 aircraft to 2,000 customers in its history and certified 30 aircraft in the past 30 years across its commercial, defence and business aircraft segments demonstrating its engineering prowess and experience.

"2024 was a great year for Embraer and I expect 2025 to be even better," said Gomes Neto. Embraer's revenues will rise to at least \$7 billion this year while its aircraft order backlog has reached a record high of \$26.4 billion.

*After 30 years at the helm, Airlink's founding CEO Rodger Foster retired at the end of March, passing the baton to his chief financial officer, de Villiers Engelbrecht. He spoke to **African Aerospace**.*

ENGELBRECHT PLANS A SMOOTH LINK TO EXPANSION

Foster's shoes are hard to fill. When asked how the transition was going Engelbrecht said: "We are currently in a period of consolidation, but I've identified some opportunities for further expansion. Airlink is known for its cautious, but thorough approach. So whenever we embark upon route network or fleet expansion it must make sense financially."

In 2024, Airlink announced that it had sold a 25 per cent share to Qatar Airways. Engelbrecht says that they are still learning a lot from each other. He points out that the 25 per cent investment "strengthened the airline's balance sheet and provides us with leverage for negotiating with financial institutions."

The airline has been rapidly expanding its fleet over the past few years and at the Paris Air Show it announced that it would lease 10 brand new Embraer E195-E2s. Engelbrecht says that the fleet expansion has been primarily for network and schedule expansion, and also to improve fleet standardisation. "It's no secret that we would like to operate a better harmonised fleet with a consistent cabin configuration," he says.

South Africa's two air services licencing councils have had their challenges. However, Engelbrecht is optimistic that the new councillors appointed in April should be ready to address the many outstanding Airlink route applications.

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In 2024, South Africa's ATNS had more than 330 of its flight procedures cancelled. Engelbrecht says that over 10 months, 7,667 or six per cent of Airlink's flights were delayed and in addition to the delays, Airlink had to cancel 108 flights and had 30 diversions. "Besides compromising our schedule, it also translated into material irrecoverable costs," he said.

Airlink has been proud of its market-leading on time performance (OTP). de Villier's says that ATNS problems have reduced the airline, as a regional carrier, to the second best OTP, "but it is a metric that we work on diligently, because we aim to lead the pack again."

And Engelbrecht goes so far as to say the flight procedure cancellations are, "nothing short of economic sabotage."

There has long been speculation that Airlink is ready to up-gauge from regional jets to narrowbody aircraft. However, Engelbrecht would not be drawn on whether it is in serious discussions with any of the manufacturers. "We maintain ongoing discussion with lessors and manufacturers and identify opportunities for suitable aircraft that will support our growth."

Airlink has in the past wet-leased Boeing 737 classics, but he says the airline is not set up to operate them. "Nonetheless, the experience was a very useful exercise that gave us insights into the costs and economics associated with operating the larger-gauge equipment. Right now, we



▼ We have ventured where others fear and we will be expanding our domestic and regional presence in the not too distant future. ▲

DE VILLIERS
ENGELBRECHT

have no foreseeable need to wet lease further 737s, as we have sufficient aircraft in our own fleet to cover any short-term capacity gaps."

A key challenge for many airlines, particularly the regional carriers, is the worldwide pilot shortage. Engelbrecht says that throughout its existence, Airlink has been a very good training academy for young pilots, but as a regional carrier, "we have always been vulnerable to pilot poaching and migration. When pilot remuneration is tied to the dimensions of the aircraft they fly, it is an unavoidable industry-wide reality for carriers operating regional aircraft."

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Airlink is sometimes considered to be both a network carrier and a regional feeder airline. Addressing this dual nature, Engelbrecht said: "Airlink is primarily a network carrier in terms of the breadth of our network, the depth of our schedule, the reach of our distribution and the extent of our relationships with long-haul carriers. However, it just happens that we operate equipment categorised as regional aircraft."

In conclusion he said: "We have ventured where others fear and we will be expanding our domestic and regional presence in the not too distant future." ▲



Ibom Air is the first of the regional government-owned airlines to take to the air.

IMAGE: AIRBUS

Can regional airlines resolve Nigeria's domestic difficulties?

Nigeria's airline scene has traditionally been difficult for smaller companies to navigate. Now, new backers are appearing in an attempt to stabilise the situation.

Alan Dron
investigates.

The commercial airline scene in Africa's most populous nation has long been a difficult place in which to operate.

With a population of 232 million, the continent's fourth-largest economy with a sizeable middle class, the country should be an ideal home for airlines, especially with the country's patchy road network.

However, airlines have found Nigeria a difficult place in which to survive. The country has been without a national carrier since the demise of Air Nigeria in 2012, with plans to set up a new flag-carrier with the assistance of Ethiopian Airlines blocked by legal objections from a grouping of Nigerian carriers in 2023.

Domestically, the country's airline scene is notorious for companies over-promising and under-delivering, with delayed and cancelled flights common, much to the fury of passengers.

There are several reasons for this, but local observers say that one cause is that many domestic airlines are owned by rich individuals. No matter how wealthy an individual is, they can struggle to support an airline with the necessary investment.

And in recent years, the steady fall in value of the national currency, the naira, has hurt Nigeria's airlines in what is largely a US dollar-denominated industry.

In their defence, airlines point to heavy taxes and airport charges imposed by the government for their financial problems.

Domestically, Nigeria has a handful of airlines, with small fleets. The latest problem to hit the sector came in late March when Green Africa's three ATR 72-600 turboprops were suddenly repossessed by their lessor. Neither Green Africa nor Ireland-based ACIA Aero Leasing would comment on the matter. It is believed that Green Africa has been reduced to a single ATR 72-500, but the airline refused to tell *African Aerospace* how many aircraft it currently has flying, citing 'company policy'.

With these problems, several of the constituent states within Nigeria have either set up, or plan to set up, their own regional airlines in the hope that official backing will

help create stable carriers that will serve their parts of the country with greater reliability.

The southeastern state of Ebonyi, for example, announced a year ago that it would establish a local carrier, as did Anambra, Lagos and Bayelsa. All said that the aim was to enhance connectivity.

Furthest along this road is Akwa Ibom state, where Ibom Air is owned by the state government but which – significantly – is operated as an independent enterprise. This is the model operated by the continent's most successful carrier, Ethiopian, where the government allows the company to operate without interference.

Ibom Air has already received three Airbus A220-300s, out of a planned 10, which are operating alongside five Mitsubishi CRJ900 regional jets. Ultimately, Ibom Air wants to move to an all-A220 fleet, which will ease planning and maintenance.

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Last summer, the airline purchased an eleventh A220-300 from a separate source because of "demand for the airline's product outpacing the delivery schedule of the [A220] order".

The A220-300 opens up a much wider range of destinations, with its range allowing it to fly as far as Cairo or Johannesburg. At present, however, the company's route map is purely domestic, with the exception of Accra, Ghana.

Meanwhile, the regional government of Enugu has also created its own airline, Enugu Air, with the delivery of two leased Embraer E170 regional jets.

The E170s arrived in Nigeria in late April, and there are plans to add a larger E190 before the airline starts operations, according to Enugu State's commissioner for transportation, Obi Ozor.

Like Ibom Air, Enugu Air's services will initially be domestic, to the country's capital Abuja, the main commercial centre of Lagos and the centre of Nigeria's oil and gas industry, Port Harcourt.

Time will tell if this new model improves Nigeria's struggling domestic airline infrastructure. ▲





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AIR CÔTE D'IVOIRE SE RAPPROCHE DE L'OUVERTURE DE SA PORTE D'ENTRÉE AFRICAINE

Air Côte d'Ivoire poursuit sa stratégie d'expansion et se prépare activement au lancement de ses vols intercontinentaux à la fin de l'année.

Air Côte d'Ivoire a accueilli, en avril dernier, le 12^{ème} avion de sa flotte, un Airbus A319. Ce renforcement progressif sur plusieurs années s'inscrit dans le cadre de l'expansion de son réseau régional.

Selon Air Côte d'Ivoire, ce nouvel avion va consolider son programme de vol régional avec un meilleur maillage de ses 21 dessertes depuis son hub d'Abidjan. Il permettra, en effet, d'augmenter la fréquence des vols (avec 2 vols allers-retours la même journée) vers plusieurs destinations en particulier en Afrique de l'Ouest et en Afrique centrale.

Les équipes d'Air Côte d'Ivoire se préparent depuis plusieurs années au lancement de ces vols intercontinentaux avec une ambition pour le pays : devenir la porte d'entrée et de sortie de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre vers l'international.

Le président du conseil d'administration d'Air Côte d'Ivoire, le Général Abdoulaye Coulibaly, a confirmé l'ouverture d'une ligne



Signature de la commande pour deux A330neo entre Air Côte d'Ivoire et Airbus à Toulouse en octobre 2022.

IMAGE: AIRBUS - PASCAL PIGEYRE - MASTER FILMS

intercontinentale reliant quotidiennement Abidjan à Paris. C'était lors de la cérémonie d'ouverture de la 130^{ème} assemblée générale de l'Association internationale des Transporteurs Aériens Francophones (ATAF).

Pour rappel, la compagnie ivoirienne avait signé avec Airbus une commande de deux Airbus A330neo pour accompagner sa stratégie de développement en octobre 2022. « Ces

nouveaux A330neo permettront à Air Côte d'Ivoire d'étendre son réseau et lancer de nouveaux itinéraires long-courriers sur les destinations transcontinentales. »

Ils permettront de relier des destinations clés telles que Paris, Londres, Genève, New York, Washington et Beyrouth. L'objectif à long terme pour Air Côte d'Ivoire est d'atteindre une flotte de 18 avions d'ici 2031 et de desservir 35 destinations dont six en dehors du continent africain.

Une étape importante a été également franchie en mars dernier, avec la signature d'un prêt auprès de la Banque ouest-africaine de développement (BOAD). Cet accord d'un montant d'environ 49,4 millions de dollars vise à soutenir le plan d'expansion de la compagnie et surtout l'acquisition de deux Airbus A330-900neo.

Air Côte d'Ivoire a également scellé un partenariat avec Bluebox Aviation Systems pour le déploiement de son système de divertissement à bord (IFE) sans fil Bluebox Wow. Blueview fonctionnera sur l'ensemble de la flotte d'Airbus à fuselage étroit d'Air Côte d'Ivoire. C'est également une nouvelle étape pour améliorer l'expérience passager à travers l'innovation numérique.

Selon plusieurs sources, la livraison des A330neo serait prévue cet été au centre de livraison d'Airbus. La compagnie nationale ivoirienne pourra réaliser les derniers préparatifs pour lancer son premier vol Abidjan-Paris d'ici la fin de l'année.

Malgré la concurrence directe avec Air France et Corsair, Air Côte d'Ivoire compte capitaliser sur son apport crucial de trafic à l'aéroport international Félix Houphouët-Boigny.

SUMMARY

AIR CÔTE D'IVOIRE CLOSER TO AFRICAN GATEWAY

Air Côte d'Ivoire is pursuing its expansion strategy with the launch of its intercontinental flights at the end of the year.

Air Côte d'Ivoire welcomed a 12th aircraft in its fleet, an Airbus A319, last April.

According to Air Côte d'Ivoire, this new aircraft will bolster its regional flight programme, with a better connectivity of its 21 destinations from its Abidjan hub. It will also increase flight frequency (with two return flights on the same day) to several destinations, particularly in West and Central Africa.

Air Côte d'Ivoire's teams have been preparing for the launch of these intercontinental flights for several years, with the common ambition to become West and Central Africa's international gateway.

The chairman of the board of Air Côte d'Ivoire, general Abdoulaye Coulibaly, confirmed the launch of an intercontinental route between Abidjan to Paris on a daily basis.

The Ivorian airline signed an order with Airbus in October 2022 for two Airbus A330neo aircraft to support its development strategy. "These new A330neo aircraft will enable Air Côte d'Ivoire to expand its network and launch new long-haul routes to transcontinental destinations."

They will connect key destinations such as Paris, London, Geneva, New York, Washington and Beirut. Air Côte d'Ivoire's long-term objective is to reach a fleet of 18 aircraft by 2031, to serve 35 destinations, including six outside Africa.

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An important step was also taken last March, with the signing of a loan from the West African Development Bank (BOAD). This agreement, amounting to approximately US\$49.4m, aims to support the company's expansion plan and especially the acquisition of two Airbus A330-900neo.

Air Côte D'Ivoire has also sealed a partnership with Bluebox Aviation Systems for the deployment of its Bluebox Wow wireless in-flight entertainment (IFE) system.

According to several sources, delivery of the A330neo is scheduled for this summer at the Airbus delivery centre. The Ivorian national airline will then finalise the launch of its first Abidjan-Paris flight by the end of the year.

Despite direct competition from Air France and Corsair, Air Côte d'Ivoire will capitalise on its crucial contribution to surging traffic at Félix Houphouët-Boigny International Airport. ▲

Sky Mali inaugure sa nouvelle route entre Bamako et Niamey via Gao.

IMAGE: SKY MALI



UNE AMBITION RÉGIONALE POUR SKY MALI

La compagnie aérienne malienne Sky Mali a inauguré une nouvelle route Bamako - Niamey via Gao marquant un tournant stratégique dans le développement de la connectivité régionale.

Ce vol inaugural de Sky Mali reliant Bamako à Niamey (via Gao) en avril dernier a été salué dans ces trois villes. Il a décollé de l'Aéroport international Président Modibo Keita – Sénou en présence de Aïcha Doucouré Haïdara, la directrice générale de Sky Mali, des membres du Conseil d'administration, ainsi que des représentants de l'ANAC Mali, l'ASECNA, l'ASAM et l'ADM. Ces vols seront assurés par deux Boeing 737.

Cette route régionale représente avant tout une avancée majeure pour la connectivité aérienne entre les deux capitales sahéliennes. Elle représente également un jalon essentiel dans le renforcement des liens bilatéraux entre le Mali et le Niger.

Sky Mali a pris son envol en mars 2020 au début de la crise de Covid-19. Elle s'est positionnée sur les vols domestiques pour ensuite desservir les capitales régionales. 2024 a été une année de consolidation pour le réseau domestique (Kayes, Gao et Tombouctou) de Sky Mali.

La compagnie envisage de faire de Gao une plateforme de correspondance pour les régions du Liptako-Gourma, aujourd'hui mal ou pas desservies par voie aérienne. La compagnie a aussi connu une expansion régionale grâce à son partenariat avec Air Sénégal. Cet accord interligne a permis notamment aux agences de voyage de vendre à la fois les billets d'Air Sénégal et Sky Mali sur l'ensemble de leurs réseaux.

« La concurrence sur le réseau régional

s'intensifie, donc les compagnies aériennes doivent redoubler d'efforts pour maintenir leur compétitivité. Il est essentiel de multiplier les partenariats et les alliances stratégiques », avait souligné à la presse Aïcha Doucouré Haïdara.

Cette route s'inscrit dans une volonté de créer un réseau aérien solide, reliant les principaux pôles économiques et culturels de la

confédération des états du Sahel (AES) ainsi que les régions enclavées.

« Ce vol incarne notre engagement à rapprocher les peuples et à favoriser une mobilité sûre et rapide dans la région. »

La ligne Bamako-Niamey marque ainsi une nouvelle étape dans l'application du plan de développement 2025-2027 de Sky Mali. ▲

SUMMARY

REGIONAL AMBITION ACHIEVED FOR SKY MALI

Sky Mali's inaugural flight from Bamako to Niamey (via Gao) last April was warmly welcomed in these cities.

It took off from the Aéroport International Président Modibo Keita-Sénou in the presence of Aïcha Doucouré Haïdara, Sky Mali's managing director, members of the board of directors, and representatives of ANAC Mali and ASECNA. The flights will be operated by two Boeing 737s.

This regional route represents a major step forward for air connectivity between the two Sahelian capitals. It is also an essential milestone in the strengthening of bilateral ties between Mali and Niger.

Sky Mali started operation in March 2020 at the start of the Covid-19 crisis. The Malian airline positioned itself on domestic flights, before moving on to serve regional capitals. 2024 was a year of consolidation for Sky Mali's domestic network (Kayes, Gao and Timbuktu).

The company plans to make Gao a hub for the Liptako-Gourma regions, which currently have

limited or no air service. It has also witnessed a regional expansion following its partnership with Air Sénégal. This interline agreement has enabled travel agencies to sell both Air Sénégal and Sky Mali tickets on all their networks.

"Competition on the regional network is intensifying, so airlines must redouble their efforts to remain competitive. It is essential to multiply partnerships and strategic alliances," Doucouré Haïdara told the press.

This route is a strategic one for the Malian airline. It is part of the airline's drive to create a solid air network linking the main economic and cultural hubs of the Sahel States Confederation (AES), and remote regions.

"This flight embodies our commitment to bringing people together and promoting safe and swift mobility in the region."

The Bamako-Niamey route is a further step in the implementation of Sky Mali's 2025-2027 development plan. ▲

THREE PILLARS THAT CAN AID AIR AUSTRAL'S RECOVERY

Hugues Marchessaux, new chairman of the board of Air Austral, shared the latest news on the airline during the opening of the business lounge at La Réunion–Roland Garros Airport in April.

Air Austral's passengers can enjoy a brand-new lounge at La Réunion–Roland Garros Airport, dedicated to Club Austral customers, MyCapricorne premium and exclusive members.

Marchessaux also presented the airline's outlook to the press. Since his appointment in December 2024, his focus has been on the accounts and the future of the airline.

A strategic plan has been launched around three pillars: reducing costs, creating new revenues and resolving operational problems with the aircraft fleet. During the financial year 2024-2025, Air Austral posted an operating loss of 40 million euros.

"The company is in a better shape today and we should achieve financial equilibrium this year. We have launched several projects to improve revenues and control costs. We're pursuing a development strategy by modernising our resources," said Marchessaux.

These results were achieved thanks to a number of levers: revenue growth with a dynamic new fare



On course: An Air Austral Boeing 777. IMAGE: AIR AUSTRAL

strategy, improved load factors, lower operating costs and a collective performance plan.

Air Austral plans to launch a mobile application and provide digital solutions to passengers to check in at the airport's self-service kiosks.



The airline went through a difficult economic and operational period with its Boeing 787s and Airbus A220s grounded due to engine problems. At the end of April, two out of eight aircraft were still grounded, representing a quarter of its fleet. Furthermore, Air Austral had to deal with the consequences of cyclones Chido in Mayotte and Garance in La Réunion.

The airline also launched "Ciel Plus", a brand-new

service enabling passengers to upgrade to Club Austral or "Confort" class via an auction system. This innovative concept will enhance comfort and generate additional revenue.

Air Austral has recently launched its summer season with increased frequencies on its flagship destinations and new travel opportunities to meet strong customer demand.

New features include the strengthening of the Paris-Madagascar route, increased frequencies on its network, in particular La Réunion-Nosy-Be, and up to 12 weekly flights between La Réunion and Paris.

Air Austral will put into service a third frequency to Bangkok in partnership with Thai Airways next December. Several South African destinations will also be offered in partnership with South African Airways. ▲



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HELLO GOOD BIO

Kwame Bekoe is literally going down into the weeds to devise a business that could one day lead to sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) production in Africa. Mark Pilling reports.

Bekoe, who has become a well-known and popular figure in aviation sustainability circles over the past few years in his role at synthetic fuel company Zero, has co-launched AfriSAF – a business with a vision to be “the leading enabler and developer of sustainable fuel and material resources across Africa, creating meaningful value”.

Although Africa has frequently been billed as having rich potential for SAF production, with abundant opportunities to harness solar power, major geo-thermal assets to deliver green energy and a huge land mass to deliver agricultural feedstock, there has been a lot of talk and studies, but virtually no concrete action.

“The keyword in Africa is potential, but it is unrealised potential,” said Bekoe. “For example, 60 per cent of the world’s solar intensity falls on Africa, but it has only one per cent of the finance in solar infrastructure – there is a big disconnect.”

Bekoe has a unique background with his aviation expertise coming from stints in commercial roles at Airbus, including a year as its director for business development in Africa, and lessor GECAS. He joined Zero in 2023 as commercial director.

Alongside his aviation credentials, Bekoe owns an art gallery, farm, spa and restaurant in Accra, the capital of West African country Ghana, which is where his family hail from.

With friends he also founded a digital platform enabling trade and investment in crop production in Ghana called GrowForMe.

Small-scale landowners dominate Africa’s farming picture with about 60 per cent of the continent’s agricultural land, many cultivating just one or two acres, and producing an estimated 70 per cent of Africa’s food.

FEEDSTOCK MARKETPLACE

Bekoe and co-founder Plabon Rahman have adapted this model to create AfriSAF.

The key to its strategy is to create a marketplace – Bekoe describes it as “an eBay for feedstock” – at a local level enabling farmers to sell the waste created after harvesting crops to become biofuel feedstock.

Today, Bekoe estimates that 250 million tonnes of agricultural waste is underutilised annually in Africa, while some 40 per cent of post-harvest food is wasted. There are also harmful greenhouse gas emissions released from the waste as it is discarded or burnt.

“We are targeting the feedstock side aiming to give farmers a great opportunity to create a revenue stream by aggregating their waste,” he explained.

AfriSAF has already built the first version of its digital marketplace that connects buyers and sellers, and it will begin rolling out in Ghana, building on learnings from the GrowForMe experience.

The firm has taken on five feedstock managers in Ghana to recruit buyers and sellers to the AfriSAF platform, said

Bekoe. The first application for the feedstock will see it pre-processed and sold to small biogas manufacturers in Ghana

“We believe launching a feedstock marketplace is the easiest route to market,” he noted.

Creating the marketplace is the first step towards the eventual goal of building full-scale SAF plants. “Once you start dealing with the feedstock, getting a grip on availability and scale, then you can target the development of production-scale biofuel plants,” said Bekoe.

AfriSAF is also developing a small biogas manufacturing plant near Accra with its first biofuel under testing to give it greater exposure and experience in the biofuel value chain.

PILOT PLANT

Its pilot plant will produce 50 litres per day from May. “This plant will enable us to demonstrate the opportunity of agricultural waste to energy,” said Bekoe.

“The idea is to create a minimum viable product in Ghana as a model and if successful then scale it to other countries in Africa,” he said. The ambition is for AfriSAF to become a project developer to build SAF plants.

Bekoe is already talking to interested parties in 14 countries across Africa about AfriSAF’s ideas. These include airlines, investors, oil and gas companies, farming co-operatives, waste management companies and aviation authorities.

“The main concern for airlines with SAF is how it will hit the bottom line,” he noted.

“Our message is that this approach will enable countries to produce SAF for their own needs and for export. The reality in Africa is that the cost of fossil jet fuel is already higher

here than anywhere else. We believe it could be quicker to reach cost parity with jet fuel than in other regions. That would be a game changer.

“Energy security is clearly linked to food security, which is linked to country security – it touches so many elements of national interests.” ▲

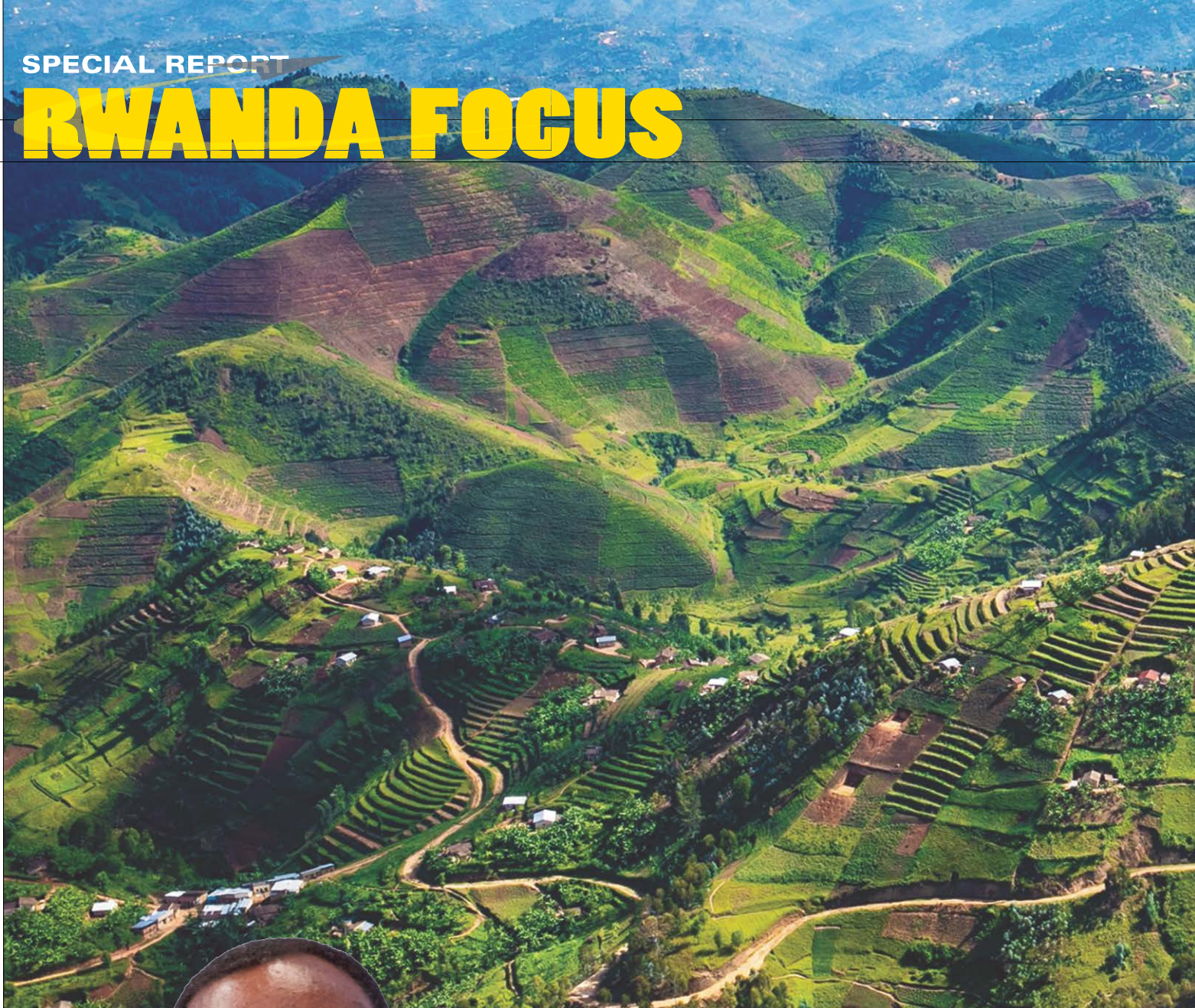
▼ Energy security is clearly linked to food security, which is linked to country security – it touches so many elements of national interests. ▲
KWAME BEKOE

IMAGE: AfriSAF



SPECIAL REPORT

RWANDA FOCUS



RWANDA'S

Rwanda's civil aviation players are strongly aligned behind the country's bold vision to achieve social and economic progress. It puts airline, airport and aviation services development at the heart of the mission.

Mark Pilling reports from Kigali.

Paul Kagame:
Rwanda's president
established Rwanda's
Vision 2050 ten years
ago.



An aerial photograph of a vast, terraced landscape in Rwanda. The hills are covered in green vegetation, with numerous small, rectangular terraces carved into the slopes. A winding road or path cuts through the middle of the landscape. In the distance, more hills and valleys are visible under a clear sky.

OVERVIEW

High hopes: Rwanda is known as the land of a thousand hills.

IMAGE: PEXELS - RWANDA LENS

HEIGHT OF AMBITION

Ambition. This single word encapsulates the vision this small, land-locked nation located in the Great Rift Valley of East Africa is working towards – a safe and prosperous future for its 14 million inhabitants.

Under the leadership of president Paul Kagame, Rwanda established its Vision 2050 as long ago as 2015, setting out a pathway to lead the country to the living standards of upper middle-income by 2035 and high-income by 2050 [the World Bank defines the former as countries with a gross national income per capita of between \$4,096 and \$12,695, and the latter over \$13,850].

It is a plan of which president Kagame, who was the leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front/Army, which ended the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda said: “We don’t want to be a status quo country or status quo people.”

Vision 2050 describes how Rwanda aspires to transform its economy and modernise the lives of all Rwandans recognising that achieving these aspirations will require bold and decisive action.

The creation of Rwanda and capital Kigali as a strong travel and trading

hub, and the gateway to East and Central Africa is foundational in this respect.

Rwanda’s government has organised and is directing its aviation assets, players and regulator to do their part in this national mission of transformation.

“A robust aviation industry is one of the key enablers that will propel us towards that realisation of the 2050 target,” explained Silas Udahemuka, director general of the Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority (RCAA).

“And believe me, any successful economic development, anywhere in the world, needs to have a vibrant aviation industry,” he said. “It is one of the engines that ignites other economic engines. It is a constant effort that keeps us alert and motivated.”

Today that effort sees the country taking bold moves to develop every aspect of its aviation landscape:

■ Flag carrier RwandAir is poised to conclude a deal that will see Qatar Airways take a 49 per cent equity stake in the airline.

■ A new hub airport for Kigali is being built to begin operating in 2028, also in partnership and with investment from Doha.

Continued
on Page 26

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

■ An academy to develop a centre of excellence for aviation training will open in late 2027.

In addition, Rwanda is embracing new technologies, including taking a lead amongst African nations in the development of unmanned aerial operations, with plans to build a nationwide network of vertiports, said Udahemuka.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Looking back 20 years, Rwanda's priority was of a different nature, with the country seeking to improve aviation safety standards in the light of "significant safety concerns" raised during ICAO audits.

Since that time, the RCAA in conjunction with ICAO, has transformed its safety management systems to achieve well above the average global safety performance, said Udahemuka. It is a safety benchmark that Rwanda strives to maintain and improve, he added.

As Rwanda continues to collaborate, learn, and enhance safety, achieving these standards fits into "the MICE [meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions] strategy of attracting events to Rwanda as a destination," he added. This means that people trust the Rwandan aviation product. "It is very intentional what we are doing, and it's having an impact," he noted.

Another important move in 2018 saw a separation of the RCAA's regulatory and operational responsibilities, leading to the establishment of Rwanda Airports Company (RAC). With the need for transparency to the fore, plus ensuring "firm quality assurance systems" are in place, the service providers – the airline, airport, and air navigation service provider – no longer sit under the umbrella of RCAA ownership.

"This speaks to why we call it being intentional. It is a priority from the government perspective – the policy is to grow the industry, and provide the required support for this to happen," explained Udahemuka.

"We needed an independent oversight entity that advises government on civil aviation regulation, and to avoid conflict of interest, which we have seen in many other places," he said.

"One of the advantages of establishing the airport company is that it allows us to really operate as a business entity," said Eva Nishimwe, deputy managing director of Rwanda Airports Company (RAC), which manages aerodromes in Rwanda, including Kigali International Airport. The country's aviation players can consider projects from a commercial



Silas Udahemuka:
"The policy is to grow the industry, and provide the required support for this to happen."
IMAGE: RCAA

and customer-centric perspective.

"When we all have the same vision as a country it makes it easier to work together, knowing that we are all aiming for the same goal," said Nishimwe.

A REGIONAL AVIATION HUB

In addition to putting RCAA on an independent footing, a couple of years earlier in 2015 the Rwandan Government took the decision to establish an aviation holding group – Aviation Travel and Logistics (ATL) – for all the main companies in the sector to "elevate the position of Rwanda as a regional aviation hub".

ATL's subsidiaries are RwandAir, Rwanda Airports Company, Akagera Aviation (a private and general aviation service provider; see panel, below) with investment in the New Kigali International Airport.

Jules Ndenga, ATL chief executive explained the rationale: "The creation of ATL came from realising that although the existing companies were working in close collaboration, we needed a more formalised environment and framework.

"The aim was to ensure that whatever is envisioned by the government and the country at the economic and political level is translated into a clear governance of all

the companies operating in the sector, so that we have the same direction and the same vision in mind."

"We developed our first strategic plan at the group level in 2020," said Ndenga. "Rwanda's vision for aviation is as an economic enabler for the country and the continent as a whole.

"Aviation is then at the front line of that strategy. That is the mission of ATL, with everyone in this sector acting to increase the connectivity of the country to the global environment," he added.

A building block for this strategy was the creation of RwandAir, which began operations in 2003 (see page 28). As the airline grew and opened new markets across Africa and into the Middle East and Europe, the need for a partner to boost the airline's growth and profile became a priority.

The same is also true of finding a partner to help develop a world-class airport and see Rwanda become a continental hub.

"As we followed this strategy, we realised the importance of having strong partnerships," said Ndenga. Although the country's aviation sector was doing quite well, it was small. "When you're aiming high, it's important to have the right partners."

Inter-governmental talks between Rwanda and

Continued on Page 28

ACADEMY BOOST TO AVIATION TRAINING

The opening of the Centre of Excellence in Aviation Skills in 2028 will usher in a new era of aviation training in Rwanda. The academy, currently under construction at Kigali International Airport, exemplifies the country's determination to develop and train homegrown aviation talent and have Africa's highest safety standards.

"The academy will be affiliated with Akagera Aviation, but run as a separate entity. We know it will meet our training needs, and it will attract people from all over Africa," said Patrick Nkulikiyimfura, the company's managing director.

Established in 2004, and part of state aviation holding Aviation Travel and Logistics, Akagera is a private aviation firm offering helicopter, fixed wing and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) services and is an approved maintenance and training organisation.

The academy will have accommodation for 192 students and feature fixed pilot training simulators and cabin crew simulators, said Nkulikiyimfura. It will acquire a fleet of eight-10 twin and single-engine training aircraft.

Rwanda needs to step up its pilot training capabilities with RwandAir estimated to require 400 new pilots over the coming decade as it

doubles its fleet, in addition to 800 cabin crew members and 180 aircraft engineers.

Akagera is already undertaking the training of 90 pilots sponsored by RwandAir and its aviation school is working towards gaining EASA instructor certification, he added.

The introduction of further UAV services "is one of my biggest priorities over the next five years," said Nkulikiyimfura. There are numerous applications for UAV operations in Rwanda from border patrol to road monitoring, he noted.

Today Akagera operates a fleet of 10 helicopters, used for missions like VIP transport and medevac, and plans to add another two-three units in the next couple of years, such as the Robinson R66 for advanced training purposes.

It is also looking at an additional Leonardo AW139 in a 12-seater configuration to cater for larger travel groups, while Nkulikiyimfura harbours the ambition of acquiring a Cessna Caravan or Beechcraft King Air to also fit this mission and give it more range on medevac services. ▲

Patrick Nkulikiyimfura: "We know it will meet our training needs, and it will attract people from all over Africa."

IMAGE: MARK PILLING





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RWANDA FOCUS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

Qatar found states with aligned goals on cross-border ties. In 2019, Qatar Airways was looking at expanding its airline investment portfolio. In Africa, RwandAir was at the top of the list.

As the two began discussing Qatar Airways taking a 49 per cent stake in RwandAir, the budding partners also reviewed the new international airport plan, which was already under way. However, it was quickly agreed this airport was not going to be large enough to fit the vision for an ambitious RwandAir/Qatar tie-up.

A new airport design, with a terminal four times as large as the original one, was developed. In addition to Qatar's investment into RwandAir, the Rwandan government and Qatar Airways sealed a deal in late 2019 giving the Doha-based carrier a 60 per cent stake in the New Kigali International Airport where it will build, own and operate the new hub.

Responsibility for both the airline and airport investments is now being transferred to the Qatar Investment Authority, the sovereign wealth fund of Qatar.

"The partnership with Qatar fits straight into the vision at a much bigger scale," said Ndenga.

CONNECTIVITY TO THE WORLD

ATL's vision is simple: to "provide strong connectivity to the world with world-class service delivery standards".

"We definitely envisage a group financial profit in the future," said Ndenga, particularly with the revenue boost generated from the opening of the New Kigali International Airport. "There are very few airlines that are profitable in the world, but there are profitable groups in aviation."

Ndenga acknowledges that achieving profitability, for airlines worldwide, is a challenge but highlights the critical contribution Rwanda's aviation system delivers to the country.

"Most airlines are economically viable meaning they make economic sense to wherever they operate, especially if there is a hub, because they basically allow other sectors of the economy, like tourism, to grow."

Ndenga added: "It is not only about airports, but we will make money with a diversity of businesses, including our training academy. With Akagera Aviation we are establishing a centre of excellence that will be open to the whole African market."

The demand is tremendous worldwide, not only for pilots, but for engineers, mechanics, etc. All these components will lead to the sustainability and profitability of the group. ▲

RwandAir is playing a strong role in delivering travellers to the country and increasingly to points across Africa via its Kigali hub.

Qatar alliance key to Rwandair's transition

It has been five years since it was announced that Qatar Airways would take a 49 per cent stake in RwandAir.

As Qatar Airways expanded its holdings in international carriers, it is attracted by the opportunity to help build a hub in a politically-stable, centrally-located country with strong regional growth potential.

For its part, Rwanda was drawn to a partner that would bring in the investment and expertise needed to take RwandAir to new heights.

It has taken several years for the deal to reach this final stage, but it remains on track.

"We had some delays, it is going to happen very soon," explained Jules Ndenga, CEO of Rwandan government holding company Aviation Travel and Logistics (ATL).

The deal still has to cross the final legal and governmental hurdles, but the two carriers have lost no time in forging closer



Yvonne Manzi Makolo: "We are going through a whole transformation exercise to streamline RwandAir."

IMAGE: AFRAA

ties. In 2021, RwandAir and Qatar Airways signed a codeshare spanning 65 routes across the globe in addition to RwandAir beginning non-stop flights between Kigali and Doha.

"We are already working together, and we continue to grow our codeshare partnership, which is at 100 plus destinations, and we co-operate in several other areas," said Yvonne Manzi Makolo, CEO of RwandAir.

With African airlines facing a high-cost environment they find "scaling up a big challenge," she said.

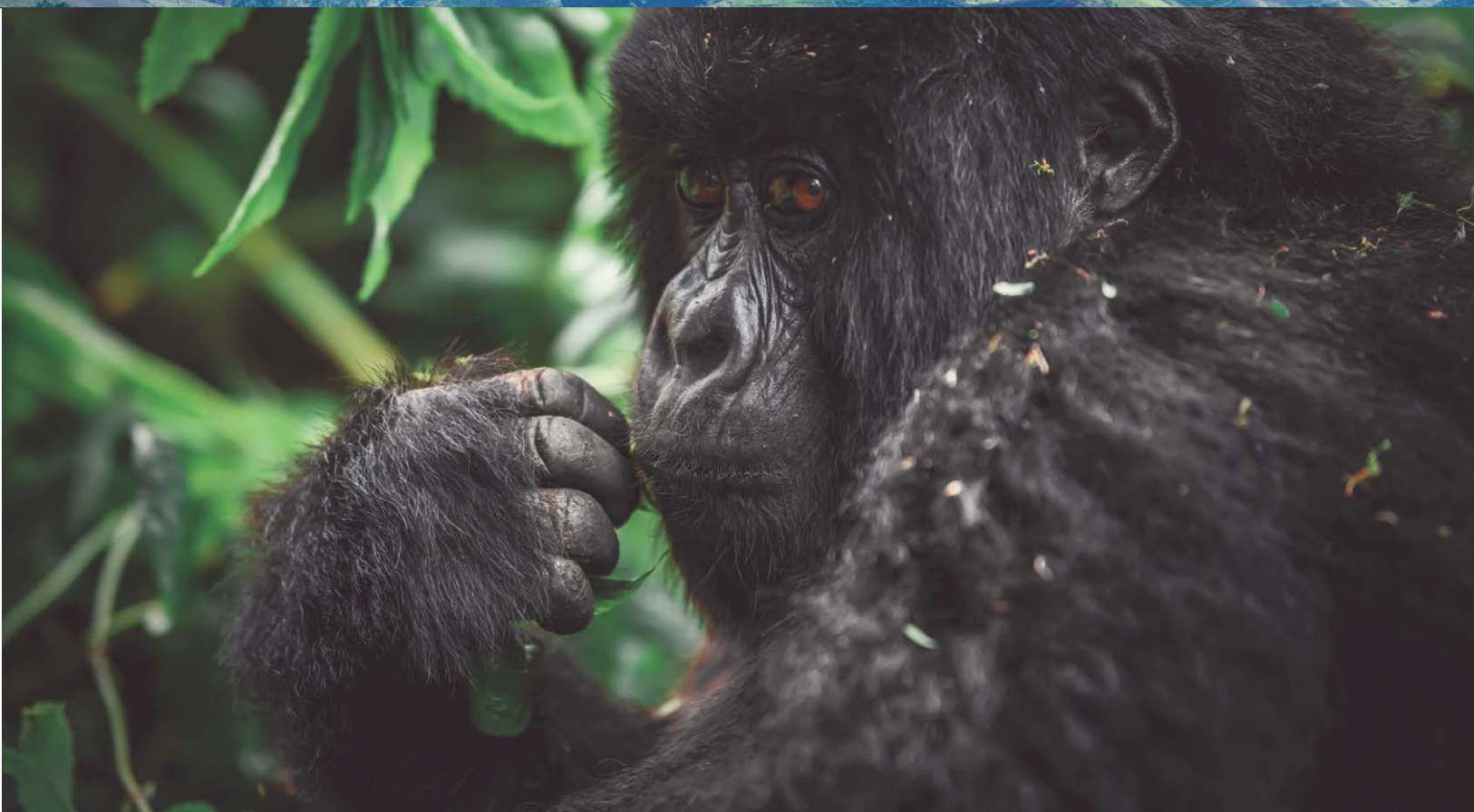
"We are going through a whole transformation exercise as well to streamline RwandAir," she explained. "This means looking at our business, all of our departments, asking whether we are right sized, whether we have the right people in the right jobs, assessing our network and our fleet," said Makolo.

Collaborating on this transformation with a more experienced airline is key in



Growing: RwandAir is adding a fourth Airbus A330-200 to its widebody fleet this summer to give it greater operational resilience on its European routes.

IMAGE: RWANDAIR



enabling RwandAir to achieve its growth ambitions, explained Makolo, who has had a high profile on the global airline stage in her role as the 81st chair of the IATA Board of Governors and the first woman to take on this job.

HUB STATUS

RwandAir's traffic performance is recovering close to pre-Covid levels, taking advantage of the country's robust economy, which saw GDP grow by 8.9 per cent in 2024 according to the World Bank. The carrier expects to carry 1.1 million passengers in its financial year to the end of June 2025, just shy of its highest ever 1.2 million carried in 2019.

This is despite disruption caused by the airline being forced to re-jig its network following the February 2025 airspace closure imposed on Rwandan-registered aircraft by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

New routes, such as Mombasa and Zanzibar are on the cards, as the carrier works towards "the end game of always seeing what more we can do to make sure that Rwanda is more connected," noted Makolo.

Just as Rwanda's tourist attractions stimulate passenger numbers to the country, Kigali is becoming a popular transit hub. "We used to be very much a point-to-point

market, but now, especially with all our long-haul routes – London, Paris, Dubai, and Doha – we are really seeing Kigali growing into a proper hub," said Makolo.

The airline's traffic mix at Kigali is now split evenly between point-to-point and transit passengers. Cargo volumes are rising fast too, bolstered by its almost daily Boeing 737 freighter service to Dubai in addition to the belly volumes on the European routes.

Makolo is eagerly anticipating the New Kigali International Airport as the capital's current airport is bursting at the seams in the busy morning waves.

AFRICAN NETWORK

On the fleet front, RwandAir is adding a fourth Airbus A330-200 to its widebody fleet this summer to give it greater operational resilience on its European routes. It will operate mainly on its popular daily London Heathrow service, but will also bolster its Lagos route.

The carrier is also adding two more 737-800s, both leased, arriving in July and August. The 737s are the backbone of the carrier's African network and serve Dubai and Doha.

Today RwandAir operates a fleet of two A330-200s, one A330-300, six Boeing 737NGs, two Bombardier CRJ900s and two De Havilland Dash 8-400s.

The carrier is looking to increase frequencies on its European routes, which are London and its three times weekly Paris service, which is tagged with Brussels. "We would like to go daily on Paris as well," she noted.

The 737s are the backbone of the carrier's African network and serve Dubai and Doha.

RwandAir is now established enough to tap the leasing market to expand its fleet, which was not the case when it began operating in 2002. "In the past nobody would take the risk, so the government had to step in and purchase the aircraft. Now people know RwandAir, and we have a track record," she added.

The carrier's ambition is to double its fleet in the next five years, said Makolo.

The airline has come close to breaking even, although it has not yet turned a profit. "But as our shareholder, currently the Government of Rwanda, says, if you add up the hotel bookings and RDB [Rwanda Development Board] tourism receipts and the export sector on RwandAir's books we would be the most profitable airline ever," said Makolo.

"The point is we are focused on supporting Rwanda's economy and enabling key sectors. We want to grow and to be profitable, and we will get there," she added. ▲

Wild side: Rwanda's tourist attractions – such as the mountain gorillas – stimulate passenger numbers to the country.

IMAGE: JEREMY STEWARDSON, UNSPLASH

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RWANDA FOCUS

The New Kigali International Airport will usher in a spacious modern hub for Rwanda.

IMAGE: RWANDAN AIRPORTS COMPANY



THE AIRFIELD OF DREAMS

A new greenfield airport is under construction—designed to deliver an African hub for eight million passengers annually.

In 2028 Rwanda hopes to have a shiny new airport as the country seeks to take another big step forward in its ambitions to create an African hub for travellers and cargo.

The New Kigali International Airport (NKIA) will not simply be a world-class airport, but the plan is to develop an airport city around it, featuring a logistics zone, education and real estate development, an exhibition centre, and sports, leisure, healthcare and entertainment complexes, explained Jules Ndenga, CEO of Rwandan government holding company Aviation Travel and Logistics (ATL).

Naturally, the priority for the airport's masterplan is to ensure everything is ready that is required to create a hub with the capacity in its first phase to handle eight million passengers and 150,000 tonnes of air freight annually.

However, "what we did with the airport city concept is to ensure that we plan for everything," said Ndenga, in terms of reserving land so that co-ordinated investment in developing the various elements of the city can be achieved.

NKIA, which is located 25km southeast of Kigali, is being developed in a partnership with the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) as the majority shareholder with 60 per cent of the shares while ATL owns 40 per cent.

The earthworks for NKIA's original design were under way when Doha's involvement in the airport's construction entered the picture. The work to prepare the site was not halted, even as a new design with a much larger airport was devised, to keep the project moving, explained Ndenga.

CONSTRUCTION PACKAGES

The development is being delivered through two major construction packages: workstream 1 (WS1) and workstream 2 (WS2).

WS1, which is finalised, includes earthworks, runway, taxiways, and aprons, substations, roads, and utility networks. These works are undertaken by Mota-Engil Engenharia e Construção África, SA, under the supervision of Dar [Dar Al-Handasah Consultants (Shair and Partners)].

Dar, a global aviation design consultancy, has been supporting the delivery of NKIA since 2020.

"Combining exceptional aviation planning and design capabilities with an intricate knowledge of Rwanda and its local context, Dar is providing the detailed design and supervising the construction of a greenfield airport that promises to establish Rwanda as a regional hub and a continental gateway to Africa and to the world," said Elie Kharrat, director of Dar Rwanda.

Upon opening, NKIA will feature a 120,000 sqm passenger terminal building, offering four-star airport services, in a modern, green and smart environment.

The design of the terminal is inspired by the hills that are an ever-present feature of Rwanda's landscape.

The project is targeting LEED Gold certification from the US Green Building Council, one of the most globally recognised and respected standards for sustainable design. The terminal building is also being assessed by the

**Continued
on Page 34**

UAV TRIALS PREPARE FOR THE UNMANNED REVOLUTION

The creation of an unmanned aerial mobility (UAM) eco-system in Rwanda is high on the country's agenda.

So high in fact that the country has already conducted unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) trials, is preparing the regulatory environment for their operation in addition to thinking about the airspace management of drones and planning a network of 30 vertiports around the country.

Rwanda has experience of UAV operations having partnered for a decade with US firm Zipline using drones to deliver medical supplies to remote areas in the country.

"We strongly believe that in the next 20 years the skies will be filled with unmanned systems, and while there are a lot of unknowns, the sooner we embrace it the better," explained Silas Udahehuka, director general of the Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority (RCAA).

Rwanda is taking a lead in Africa on UAM because it fits with the country's



national development vision alongside benefits on sustainability and delivering an alternative to lengthy road travel.

It is seeking to innovate in a safe and considered manner, which is why Rwandan experts sit on the international panels looking at UAM certification, said Udahehuka.

The RCAA is working with the country's air navigation service provider

to integrate unmanned traffic management with the co-ordination of conventional aircraft within two-three years.

The RCAA has identified the locations for 30 vertiports, one in each district, and is waiting for the government to release the land so it can begin building them.

The aim is for a UAM network to be operational within a decade. ▲

Flying doctor:
Rwanda has partnered with US firm Zipline using drones to deliver medical supplies to remote areas in the country.

IMAGE: ZIPLINE

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RWANDA FOCUS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

Building and Construction Authority (BCA) of Rwanda for Green Mark Certification, insuring compliance with all the requirements for a green airport.

The WS2 package is being constructed by the joint venture comprising Urbacon Trading and Contracting Rwanda Ltd as the leader of the JV, Mota-Engil Engenharia e Construção África SA, and Consolidated Contractors Group SAL. Dar continues in its role as consultant supervising the WS2 construction works.

WS2 will cover the development of the terminal building, control tower, cargo terminal and all the airport's supporting infrastructure for an airport of more than US\$2bn in value.

TRAFFIC VOLUMES

As Rwanda looks ahead to the economic and social ripple effect of NKIA, in addition to the employment impact during construction, today's Kigali International Airport (KIA) must handle rising traffic volumes with its small terminal until NKIA opens.

KIA handled 1.3 million passengers in 2024, with a target to reach 1.5 million this year, said Charles Habonimana, the airport's managing director. Since the pandemic, traffic has been growing at eight per cent annually.

KIA's growth strategy naturally puts flag carrier RwandAir at the centre. "RwandAir is our sister company, and our strategies are aligned. We sit in the same room and discuss how they want to grow," said Habonimana.

The airport is working with other carriers to increase frequencies on their existing routes, such as Ethiopian Airlines, which now serves Addis Ababa three-times daily from Kigali, Kenya Airways which operates two to three daily flights, as well as Brussels Airlines



and Turkish Airlines which operate daily flights to Kigali from their European hubs, as well as attracting new carriers and adding new destinations.

Qatar Airways returned to Kigali, offering a connection to its Doha hub in mid-June, a service coordinated with RwandAir.

The volume of transit traffic is growing, as intended, as airlines develop connections to wider networks. This is in evidence during the two banks at KIA when the airport can become congested.

"We are working on optimising what we have already, but it wouldn't make sense to invest a lot into the existing airport as commercial flights will be moving," said Habonimana. "We are looking at how we can use technology as best as we can to make the process more

Handle with care: Today's Kigali International Airport (KIA) must handle rising traffic volumes with its small terminal until NKIA opens.

IMAGE: RWANDAN AIRPORTS COMPANY

efficient and give passengers the same level of service."

The airport is witnessing a rise in cargo traffic due to RwandAir's European flight services, plus the carrier's dedicated Boeing 737 freighter routes to Dubai and Djibouti, said Habonimana. The airport handled over 20,000 tonnes of freight last year, and expects 25 per cent growth this year.

Much more is expected at NKIA. "Rwandan farmers tell us they need more capacity because they have the products and the market, so it's up to us to match that by building the required infrastructure," he added.

When KIA's traffic is transferred to the new airport, the existing airport will continue to serve its private aviation customers and seek to attract new ones. ▲

RwandAir operates turboprops on domestic and regional routes.

IMAGE: RWANDAIR





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ANDEM POSE LES BASES DE LA TRANSFORMATION DU GABON

Les autorités gabonaises ont officiellement lancé la construction du nouvel aéroport international d'Andem et de « Libreville 2 », une cité administrative moderne et éco-urbaine.

Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, Président du Gabon, a procédé à la pose de la première pierre du projet de construction de la nouvelle ville "Libreville 2" et de l'aéroport international d'Andem en avril dernier. Ces deux projets visent à moderniser les infrastructures aéroportuaires du pays, renforcer la connectivité aérienne, accompagner le développement touristique et stimuler la croissance économique à travers notamment l'entrée d'investissements étrangers.

Les travaux de ce nouvel aéroport seront confiés au groupe panafricain Ebomaf vont s'échelonner sur quatre ans. Cette plateforme s'étendra sur une superficie de 30 000 hectares.

Elle sera équipée d'infrastructures modernes, d'une piste de 3.5 km et d'un terminal 35,000 m² et pourra accueillir jusqu'à 5 millions de passagers par an. Financé selon un modèle de partenariat public-privé, ce projet est estimé à environ 360 millions de dollars.

Les autorités gabonaises ambitionnent de transformer ce nouvel aéroport en un véritable hub en Afrique centrale. Ce projet s'inscrit dans le cadre d'un programme de modernisation et de réhabilitation des infrastructures aéroportuaires du pays. Un partenariat avait été signé en août 2023 entre l'État gabonais et la société GSEZ Airport pour favoriser les déplacements intérieurs, désenclaver les



provinces, améliorer la sécurité et le confort des voyageurs ainsi que de créer des emplois directs et indirects pour les jeunes.

Par ailleurs, le président gabonais a célébré les travaux de modernisation de l'aéroport de Makokou rebaptisé Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet. D'importants travaux ont été réalisés : mise aux normes de sécurité et de sûreté aérienne, extension du bâtiment administratif et de la piste d'atterrissage de même que la réhabilitation de l'aérogare.

Dans le cadre d'un vaste programme de modernisation, les autorités gabonaises ont réalisé une opération de prise de participation d'Afrijet et lancé une nouvelle compagnie aérienne, Fly Gabon, en été 2024. Après Port-Harcourt au Nigéria, un vol inaugural à destination de Bangui – République centrafricaine – a été opéré en mars dernier. Cette consolidation vise aussi à mutualiser le savoir-faire et les compétences pour améliorer l'efficacité de la nouvelle structure étatique.

Le Gabon amorce ainsi un tournant majeur dans le développement de ses infrastructures pour peser de tout son poids dans la région. ▲

Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, president of Gabon, lays the first stone at Andem airport, Gabon.

IMAGE: PRESIDENCE DE LA REPUBLIQUE GABONAISE

SUMMARY

ANDEM LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR GABON TRANSFORMATION

The Gabonese authorities have officially launched the construction of the new Andem International Airport and "Libreville 2", a modern eco-urban administrative city.

Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, president of Gabon, laid the foundation stone for the construction of the new "Libreville 2" city and Andem International Airport last April.

□□□□□

These two projects aim to modernise the country's airport infrastructure, strengthen air connectivity, support tourism development and stimulate economic growth through foreign investment.

Work on the new airport entrusted to Panafrican group Ebomaf will run over four years. The airport complex will cover an area of 30,000 hectares and will be equipped with modern infrastructure, a 3.5

km runway and a 35,000 m² terminal. It will be able to handle up to five million passengers a year. Financed under a public-private partnership model, the project is worth around US\$360m.

Gabonese authorities aim to transform the new Andem Airport into a hub in Central Africa. This project is part of a broader national programme to modernise and rehabilitate the country's airport infrastructure.

A partnership was signed in August 2023 between the Gabonese government and GSEZ Airport to promote domestic travel, open up the remote provinces, improve passenger safety and comfort, and create direct and indirect jobs for young people.

Moreover, the Gabonese president launched the modernised Makokou Airport, renamed Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet. Significant work has been carried

out: compliance with safety and security standards, expansion of the administrative building and runway, as well as the rehabilitation of the terminal.

□□□□□

As part of the modernisation programme, the Gabonese authorities carried out a stake acquisition operation with Afrijet and launched a new airline, Fly Gabon, during summer 2024.

After Port Harcourt in Nigeria, an inaugural flight to Bangui in the Central African Republic was operated last March. This consolidation also aims to pool expertise and skills to improve the efficiency of the new state administration.

Gabon is thus embarking on a major turning point in the development of its infrastructure to weigh in fully in the region. ▲



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China's Chengdu J-10 remains an attractive option now for major African air forces.

IMAGE: ALAN WARNES

CURRY AND PRICE

HOW CHINA TEMPTS AFRICAN NATIONS WITH DOLLARS AND TRADE DEALS

China's aerospace industry is attempting to spread its tentacles all over Africa, even if money for most governments is tight. That's not a problem though for Beijing, because underwriting deals by taking a share of the customer's natural minerals instead can always be an option. Alan Warnes reports.

China's investment in African mining has fueled its growing demand for these resources, especially for electric vehicles and other technologies.

Developing its Silk Road initiative sea ports to control strategic trade routes has also been at play in Tanzania (Port Bagamoyo) and Djibouti (Port Doraleh).

The Tanzania Air Force has operated a large number of Chinese aircraft for a while including the very capable Chengdu J-7G acquired in 2013. While Djibouti now serves Chinese military interests with its close proximity to the Gulf of Aden. Since the port project was founded in 2013, the Djibouti air force has taken on two Harbin Y-12E Turbo Pandas, one Harbin Z-9WE helicopter and a Xian MA60 transport aircraft.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) at least 21 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa received large consignments of Chinese arms between 2019 and 2023.

TUNISIA'S SMALL FORCE WITH A BIG ROLE TO PLAY

Despite its relatively large size and strategically important location in northern Africa, the Tunisian Republic Air Force (TRAF) is one of the smallest air arms in the region.

In the mid-80s there was a spurt of growth with the purchases of Northrop F-5E/Fs, Aero L-59Ts, Sia Marchetti SF 260s, and Lockheed Martin C-130H Hercules followed between 1999-2010. But over the subsequent 30 years, the TRAF was neglected.

The US was the first major power to recognise Tunisian sovereignty and established relations in 1956 after its independence from France. Since then, Tunisia has become a critical partner and a major non-NATO ally.

Much of the US support has come in hand-outs through the Excess Defense Article (EDA) programme, in the shape of 22 ex-US Army Bell UH-1Hs between 1999-2010, eight ex-USAF Lockheed Martin C-130Bs between 1998-2002 and unusually around 16 Sikorsky HH-3Es from the USAF's bone yard at Davis Monthan AFB in Arizona in the late-90s.

The watershed moment, that led to more investment for the TRAF, came in June 2015 when 38 foreign tourists, including 30 British, were murdered in a terrorist attack on a beach at Port El Kantaoui near Sousse.

With an obvious shortfall in intelligence, the US government has helped to bolster the TRAF initially with 12 Maule MX-7-180B surveillance aircraft, that were delivered on May 12, 2016, within a year of the terrorist attack.

□□□□□

They were part of a US\$20 million aid package provided by the US to improve the country's border surveillance security and are believed to be split between Remada close to the border with Libya and Tunis/Carthage.

Eight AeroVironment RQ-20 Pumas surveillance drones were purchased for US\$8 million, through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) route, and delivered during 2021/22.

The TRAF's intelligence-gathering capabilities was

bolstered even further with the subsequent purchase of four Cessna 208B Grand Caravans in a 'Tunisian intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance ISR configuration' according to the US government.

Textron Aviation announced on March 7, 2022 that it had been awarded a contract to supply four L3 Wescam MX-15-equipped Cessna 208 Grand Caravan EXs with ATI Engineering Services acting as systems integrator. The first two aircraft were delivered to Tunis to serve 41 Squadron in July 2024 and the second pair followed in August 2024.

In late 2020, Tunisia announced it was to purchase eight Beechcraft T-6C Texan II trainers and a possibly four Beechcraft AT-6E Wolverine light attack aircraft, although a deal for the latter has not been concluded to date.

While Textron went public in late 2022 that the first one had been handed over, the first four were not delivered in-country until September 2022.

Four months earlier, in May 2022, TRAF pilots had participated in an exercise at Avon Park Air Force



There have been many Chinese jet trainers sold to Africa, but the Guizhou FTC-2000 (known as JL-9 in China) is only operated by the Sudan Air Force, where it has been used primarily for light attack.

IMAGE: ALAN WARNES

Clearly it's a revenue-driver and Chinese dealers hawk arms to African nations by offering cut-rate prices, and as one bewildered European sales person told the author "They carry wads of dollar notes in their briefcases to curry favour with the would-be customer. Its very frustrating."

□ □ □ □ □

The Pakistan Air Force pulled off a huge marketing stunt for the Chinese during its recent spat with the Indian Air Force in early May. When the PAF's very capable Chengdu J-10CE and Chengdu JF-17Cs shot down five enemy aircraft, three of them being the highly-capable fourth-generation Dassault Rafale, with the very long range Chinese PL-15 air-to-air missiles, African air force chiefs must have taken notice.

The Nigerian Air Force operates both the Chengdu F-7 and JF-17, and could now look at the J-10CE as an option.

There is also continuous speculation that Egypt

has bought the J-10CE, and hosting the recent 'Eagles of Civilisation 2025' exercise when J-10Cs flew alongside Egyptian AF MiG-29M2s between April 19 to May 4. did nothing to dim that speculation.

There is no way the Egyptians can afford them, but President SiSi's government could come to some barter agreement with its mineral resources, including copper, gold, silver, zinc, platinum, phosphate, iron ore and coal.

What the US would say is another matter, given it has ploughed billions of dollars of military aid into Egypt since the 1975 Camp David Accord. Using the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) initiative would curtail future US military aid to Egypt, which led to Cairo abandoning attempts to buy 24 Russian Su-35 Flanker-Es in 2019, even though the first batch were ready for delivery. These are now being delivered to Iran and Algeria.

The Egyptians are no strangers to Chinese fighters having operated a large number of

Chengdu J-7s in the past, as have Namibia, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

The Hongdu K-8 Karakoram light attack/jet trainer has also been a very popular purchase by African air forces – Egypt, Ghana, Namibia, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe have all operated the type although the Ghana Air Force examples were grounded within a year or so because of a lack of support - a regular criticism of buying Chinese.

Africa has been a destination for some other more obscure light attack/jet trainers. Sudan bought six Guizhou FTC-2000Gs known as the JL-9, to replace its A-5 Fantans during 2016, deliveries were completed by 2018. Zambia in 2016 became the first and only export customer of the Hongdu L-15 attack/fighter trainer variant known as the JL-10 Falcon.

Like so many countries in Africa, Sudan and Zambia enjoy close relationships as major trading partners with China, and as Europe abandons much of Africa because of conflict, particularly in the Sahal region, there will undoubtedly be more business for China. ▲



The TRAF has a history of operating Lockheed Martin C-130B/H Hercules, and became the first African nation to acquire C-130Js – two in 2013/14.

IMAGE: USAF/ SENIOR AIRMAN CHRISTOPHER QUAIL

Range, Florida, flying the AT-6 Wolverine, where according to the USAF they flew with US pilots to co-develop tactics, techniques and procedures to combat violent extremist organisations while demonstrating the capabilities of the airborne extensible relay over-horizon network (AERONet).

Tunisia sent two pilots to operate the AERONet from the rear seat of the AT-6E Wolverine, when they learnt the secure combat system that allows pilots

to track enemy movements while also maintaining communication with command and control and partner nation forces. So far, Tunisia has not committed to a Wolverine purchase.

The T-6Cs serve No 13 Squadron at Sfax Air Base/Sfax-Thyna International Airport in the primary trainer role. The initial cadre of Tunisian pilots began training at the company's Wichita facility in Kansas on October 31.

Ground-based training devices were supplied and

installed at Sfax Air Base by TRU Simulation and Training, an affiliate of Textron Aviation. They have replaced the ageing SF 260 basic trainers and the Aero L-59Ts in the advanced training role as well as border patrol.

The past five years have seen the TRAF take steady, but modest, attempts to modernise. The question now is what lies ahead for the 40 year old Northrop F-5s? ▲



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Embraer enlisted a Brazilian Air Force KC-390 Millennium to demonstrate the aircraft's capabilities to the SANDF in November 2023.

IMAGE: SAM J BASCH



DENEL BUOYED BY BRAZIL

South Africa's state-owned Denel Group has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Brazil's Embraer to cooperate on the C-390 Millennium aircraft, possibly signalling a future airlifter acquisition.

Sam J Basch
investigates.

■ The KC-390 has been acquired by Brazil, Portugal, Hungary, South Korea, the Netherlands, Austria, Czech Republic and an undisclosed customer.

Embraer's C-390 has lately visited South Africa several times, most recently during Africa Aerospace & Defence (AAD2024) where president Cyril Ramaphosa posed for photographs in the cockpit.

The MoU signed at the LAAD defence exhibition in Rio de Janeiro this year outlines the framework for potential collaboration on the aircraft with a focus on aerostructures manufacturing, maintenance, repair and overhaul.

"We are thrilled to strengthen our ties with Denel, a proven aerospace leader in South Africa, as the country looks to replace its legacy military aircraft," said Fabio Caparica, vice president of contracts at Embraer Defence & Security.

Speaking to *African Aerospace*, Denel group executive CEO Aerospace Chris Boshoff said the company was "well-equipped and a suitably qualified industrial partner who will significantly enhance the strategic airlift support capabilities on the African continent."

Embraer estimates African air forces would require 105 airlifters in the C-390 class over the next 20 years. The agreement with Embraer followed several audit visits to Denel Aerospace's facilities, which are currently further enhanced, Boshoff stated.

With all South African Air Force (SAAF) C-130BZ Hercules aircraft grounded for lack of maintenance, its regional peacekeeping operations in Africa relied mostly on foreign-owned charter aircraft, notably Ilyushin Il-76 airlifters.

Maintenance contracts with Denel Aerospace remain underfunded, notwithstanding a special National Treasury allocation to keep the C-130BZ fleet flying. According to Boshoff, Denel continues to support the SAAF fleet as a long-standing C-130 Hercules certified service centre, the only one in Africa.

On the KC-390's first visit to South Africa in November 2023, General Rudzani Maphwanya, chief of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) acknowledged problems with ageing transport aircraft, specifically the Hercules aircraft acquired in 1963. With an eye on future-oriented heavy and medium transporter aircraft, Maphwanya said the SANDF was firstly looking to BRICS, the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa grouping.

At AAD2024 last September, Embraer demonstrated the C-390 Millennium's capabilities to the SANDF. China displayed its large four-engine Xi'an Y-20 airlifter.

South Africa's current withdrawal of soldiers and equipment from the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) underscored the problems facing the SANDF. Its troop contingent formed part of the Southern African Development Community Mission (SAMIDRC). The failed mission ended with the fall of Goma to M23 rebel forces.

Commentators point to a "disgraceful" lack of resources for South Africa's troops, notably air mobility and air support.

In a heated debate in Parliament in May, members across the political spectrum agreed the SANDF was in such a severe decline that South Africa should forget its African peacekeeping ambitions.

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A significant part of the problem is chronic underfunding and a declining budget allocation over many years. The country now spends a paltry 0.7 per cent of GDP on defence, with a disproportionate percentage going to personnel expenses. This leaves little for maintenance and upgrades of prime mission equipment or modernisation.

Reports reveal that only a handful of the SAAF's 330 aircraft are available, mostly due to lack of spares and maintenance. This leaves almost all fighters and helicopters grounded. Budget constraints also sees pilots flying less than planned hours, leading to currency issues.

Military analysts argue that peacekeeping deployments in Africa aside, South Africa's geographic size, long coastline, remote island possessions and its international southern ocean zone obligations, demand a modern air transport – and maritime reconnaissance – capability. The question is whether it could afford any acquisition at present.

Embraer claims its new generation KC-390 is a suitable candidate, capable of performing a wide range of missions. These include humanitarian aid, transport, air drop of cargo and troops, aerial refuelling, medical evacuation, maritime search and rescue, firefighting and special operations. ▲

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NAMIBIA'S WESTAIR SIGNS WITH AIRBUS FOR H225 H-CARE

The Namibian branch of Italian-based international aviation services provider Westair Helicopters has contracted Airbus Helicopters to provide multi H-Care-In-Services for its new fleet of three Airbus H225 helicopters working on offshore energy projects in Namibia.

The three H225 helicopters have recently been deployed to support the offshore exploration activities of French oil giant Total Energies near the port of Luderitz.

Romain Trapp, Airbus Helicopters executive vice president for customer support and services, said the company was proud to partner Westair Helicopters in the execution of its offshore operations in Namibia:

"We are honoured to support both Westair Helicopters and Total Energies in their long-range, offshore missions with this H-Care multi services package for the H225," Trapp said.



Westair Helicopters chief executive officer Edwin Soeters said the H-Care multi-services package will allow the company to deliver tailor-made solutions for the wide-ranging needs of its customers.

"The Namibian oil and gas industry requires extended range helicopters and as such, the long-range capabilities of the H-225 were required to serve the Total Energies exploration campaign. With this fleet of three H225 helicopters, we will be able to offer a safe,



Shore thing: The H225s have been deployed to support the offshore operations of the oil and gas industry.

IMAGE: WESTAIR

reliable and efficient service to our most demanding customers," Soeters said.

Westair Helicopters offers helicopter aviation services to offshore production platforms, vessels and drilling rigs around Africa.

The company also offers offshore cargo transportation services for equipment used in the offshore oil and gas drilling industry.

Westair Helicopters also runs a specialised limited search and rescue (L-SAR) service using

helicopters specifically configured for critical rescue missions. The company's fleet of 14 aircraft includes Leonardo AW-139, AW-169 and AW-189 variants with a carrying capacity of between nine and 16 passengers.

Most of the aircraft are presently deployed to Africa supporting the offshore operations of the oil and gas industry in Namibia, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Republic of Congo, Mauritania and Sao Tome. ▲

SOUTH AFRICA USES DRONES FOR BORDER CONTROL

The South African government has launched a new border surveillance project which uses drones to detect criminal activities and coordinate security responses.

The drones are operated by the Border Management Agency (BMA), which is a statutory body charged with securing South African ports of entry and international boundaries.

Home affairs minister Leon Schreiber launched the project in May, following two test phases in December and April. During the tests, the drones helped the BMA to apprehend thousands of illegal immigrants entering the country from neighbouring Zimbabwe.

"There are two models being rolled out, the Evo Max 4N and Evo Max 4T. The 4N is designed specifically for night-time operations with starlight vision and long-range thermal cameras, which allows us to operate in the darkest conditions.

"These devices can fly at speeds of up to 43



Eye in the sky: The Evo Max 4N can fly at speeds of up to 43 kilometres per hour, tracking people or vehicles across wide areas

IMAGE: AUTEL ROBOTICS

kilometres per hour, tracking people or vehicles across wide areas," Schreiber said.

The minister said the drones have exceptional navigation capabilities which allow them to identify and track multiple objects while relaying real-time intelligence data to the BMA command and control centres.

The BMA has also invested in the training of

personnel to operate and maintain the drones.

So far, eight drone pilots are being trained as the BMA looks to expand the drone surveillance project.

"The success of the airborne border surveillance project is not just about the devices and technology. It is also about the people who operate them, and the cultural shift that comes with integrating these systems and technologies into our operations," Schreiber said.

According to the Border Management Agency, South Africa is battling against large numbers of illegal immigrants who flood the country from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and several other poor African countries in search of employment and opportunity.

The BMA also faces serious crimes including the smuggling of stolen vehicles out of the country, explosives into the country as well as the smuggling of goods and illicit cargoes in and out of the country's porous borders. ▲

Can we safely navigate AI-r traffic control?

*Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Air Traffic Management (ATM) holds the promise of addressing many of the structural problems in the provision of ATM across Africa. **Guy Leitch** reports.*

▼ AI can automate aspects of traffic management, such as sequencing arrivals and departures, adjusting flight paths to avoid congestion, and optimising airspace usage. ▲

These structural problems relate to, amongst other factors, a skills shortage exacerbated by difficulties in skills retention, the challenge of English proficiency and the lack of standardisation due to fragmented regulatory authorities and enabling legislation.

Europe and the USA have led the way in artificial intelligence (AI) investment (also called digitalisation) in ATM and the lessons learned in these environments are expected to pave the way for the digitalisation of African air space. ATM digitalisation involves integrating technologies to improve communication, navigation, and surveillance (CNS).

Across the world, AI is expected to revolutionise Air Traffic Control (ATC) by automating routine tasks. Notably, AI systems are expected to continuously monitor air traffic and identify potential conflicts earlier than human controllers. Effective AI systems can generate optimal resolutions, allowing human ATC to become more effective and safer in managing potential airspace conflicts.

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A key rationale behind AI digitalisation is that the costs of ATC training and development are reduced and the reliability and efficiency of the existing ATCs should improve as these are vulnerable to human conditions, such as fatigue, overload and illness.

The increasing implementation of Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) provides AI with accurate real-time information. Additionally, by replacing voice communications, datalink systems allow ATC and pilots to exchange information via text-based messages. This reduces communication errors, enhances clarity and frees up congested radio frequencies.

Africa has relatively low levels of English proficiency. In non-English speaking countries there is considerable hope for voice recognition software which can interpret

communications between pilots and controllers, providing real-time assistance and reducing the risk of miscommunication.

AI can automate aspects of traffic management, such as sequencing arrivals and departures, adjusting flight paths to avoid congestion, and optimising airspace usage. Further, AI predictive analytics can forecast traffic patterns, weather conditions and potential conflicts, enabling fewer human ATCs to make more informed decisions and proactively manage traffic flows.

Given the challenges of staffing distant control towers, remote towers are another significant potential for digitalisation.

However, the reliability of AI systems is critical, particularly where there may be limited technical support and skills. System failures could have severe consequences, highlighting the need for robust redundancy.

The International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA) is confident that AI will not make human ATCs redundant. The union argues that ATCs require keen situational awareness, rapid decision-making and the ability to manage multiple tasks under high-stress conditions. It argues that air traffic controllers bring indispensable skills such as judgment, flexibility and the ability to handle unexpected situations that automated systems are not expected to fully replicate.

□ □ □ □ □

The future of AI in air traffic management is therefore expected to lie in the effective co-ordination of digitalisation with the human element of ATC. For the implementation of digitalisation, seamless human-machine interfaces are essential to prevent information overload and ensure controllers can effectively manage a new technology. Ergonomic design and user feedback are critical in this regard.

There is concern though that this will require a significant realignment of the enabling legislative environment. Regulations at international, regional and national levels will have to evolve to address issues such as accountability and data privacy.

A recent study concluded that to maximise the benefits of automation, it is crucial to streamline ICAO processes and accelerate the development of ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) for AI implementation. Presently, Air Navigation Service Providers (ANSPs) across Africa are fragmented across the 54 countries' regulatory environments.

At present in Africa there is no unified standard for the implementation of CNS/ATM systems. It is therefore proposed that a comprehensive, compliance-based approach is necessary to regulate ANSP CNS/ATM system implementations. Thus, AI systems will have to be certified according to international standards, not the local African regulations. ▲

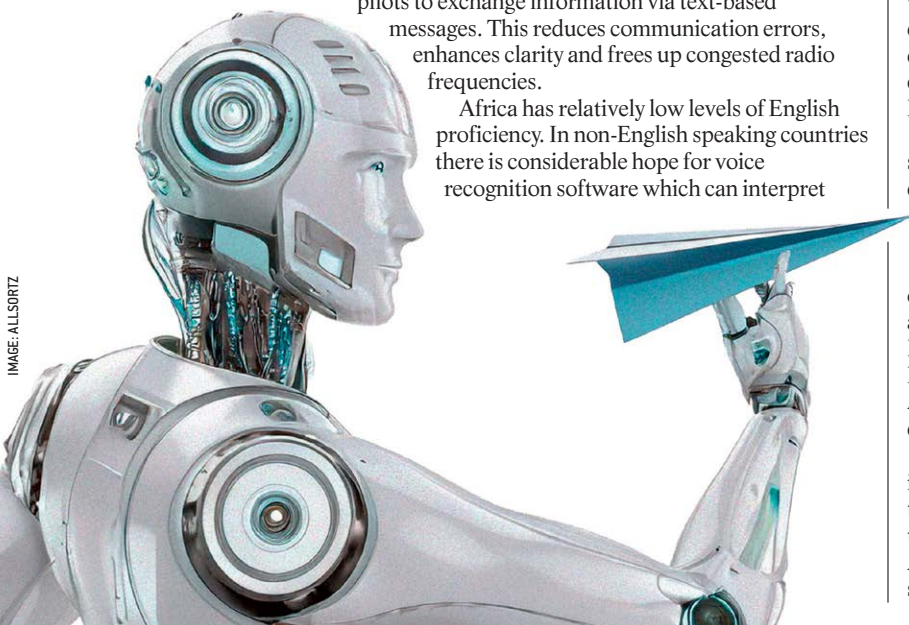


IMAGE: ALLSORTZ

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Kigali Convention Centre hosts the ninth Aviation Africa.
IMAGE: REAGAN M / UNSPLASH

Aviation Africa heads for Rwanda

The ninth Aviation Africa Summit and Exhibition takes place in Kigali in September and looks set to be the biggest yet.

Rwanda has been the spiritual home for the Aviation Africa Summit – the largest top-level event for the industry on the continent – and returns to Kigali in September for what could be the largest edition yet.

Rwanda's aviation industry is developing at a pace. The much-publicised relationship with Qatar is about to bear fruit with investment in the central African country's national airline, Rwandair, and majority ownership of a new hub airport close to the capital.

The country's potential for a hub has been recognised for more than a decade, but backed by a pro pan-African government that has dropped visa restrictions on visitors from across the continent and adopted visa-on-entry for many other nations around the world has seen the land of a thousand hills gain popularity with visitors in tourism and business.

The country's president – Paul Kagame – was heading the African Union when it launched The Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) in January 2018.

The SAATM is critical to the African Union's integration agenda and is a crucial logistic infrastructure for the successful operation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area, complemented by the protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods and the African Passport.

While publicly the initiative is judged to be moving grindingly slowly, behind the scenes a lot of the political work is being done.

The expectation is that this year's Aviation Africa event will see announcements and discussion from top government officials and industry practitioners challenge and debate the barriers and value of the initiative.

The event has traditionally seen delegates including government ministers from across the region, directors general of civil aviation, airline CEOs and industry leaders. This year air chiefs from different nations will be attending.

The summit aims to air the big-picture issues and involves leaders in the main stage discussion. A separate 'Insight Theatre' allows more detailed discussion with various symposia over the two days.

"There are a lot of networking opportunities surrounding

the event," said Mark Brown, managing director of organiser Times Aerospace Events. "In the past delegates and exhibitors have said how many great contacts they have made, and how they were able to access the decision makers in a relaxed environment."

More than 60 airlines tend to visit the show at a senior level. Airlines such as Rwandair, Ethiopian, Ugandan, Kenya, Qatar, South African are represented and several CEOs join the host journalists on stage for one-on-one discussions.

The event also features many of the smaller and regional airlines. The summit will also hear from James Hogan, who brings his experience of leading Etihad and Gulf Air and is now the chairman of Knighthood Capital based in Switzerland, which is working with African carriers.

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This year's summit will also feature key developments in the world of advanced air mobility (AAM) and unmanned aircraft by collocating with the Africa Drone Forum, which will be looking at how Africa is gearing up for "Africa's low-altitude drone economy: The next frontier for innovation, investment, and infrastructure".

Africa has already been a leading light in the implementation of regulations regarding the integration of drones into controlled airspace and the forum will be hosting a symposium in the Insight Theatre.

Safety will also come under the spotlight with a focus on the changing threats of wildlife incursions on runways – and how to mitigate the risk.

Aviation Africa is also working alongside the African Business Aviation Association (AfBAA) and the importance of business aviation to the future of African economies. Pan African development will be weaved through the sessions with a number of leaders from business and GA across the continent.

The event takes place at Rwanda's premier event venue – the Kigali Convention Centre (KCC) – alongside the Radisson Blu Hotel on September 4 and 5.

Details are available at www.aviationafrica.aero

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Marcelle Nethersole speaks to the founder and CEO of Etam Avitat Services in Nigeria.

Can you tell me about Etam Avitat?

Etam Avitat Services stands as a pioneering force in Nigeria, being the sole trip support company in the region. This innovation is reshaping the landscape of aviation on support through its commitment to safety and efficiency.

Specialising in crucial services such as flight planning, ground handling, flight clearances, and aircraft management, Etam Avitat caters to a wide-ranging clientele. These include both business jet owners and commercial airlines, highlighting the company's versatility and dedication to service.

As the founder, what made you set up the company?

Having travelled extensively as a pilot, I've observed significant differences in operations between the local companies in Nigeria and their counterparts in Europe and America.

In Nigeria, the crew often shoulder the burden of managing flight logistics, which adds considerable stress before even taking off.

This contrasts sharply with other global destinations where a dedicated team handles everything from obtaining overnight permits to organising fuel releases and arranging hotel accommodation and crew transportation. Inspired by this efficient model, I established Etam Avitat to offer comprehensive services to private jet owners and commercial airline operators.

Can you tell me about the company's fleet?

Our company offers specialised trip support services by partnering with private jet owners like Trebet Avia, Jaz Avia, and Zjets Air. While we don't own aircraft, these partnerships give us access to a broad fleet, including Bombardier Challenger 601 and 605; Hawker 800XP and Embraer models such as ERJ 135/145, and Legacy 650 enabling us to provide premium, tailored flight operations. We operate globally, and our clients range from private jet owners to commercial airlines and private individuals.

Where do you source your pilots from?

Our core services include crewing and resourcing, where we meticulously select pilots from esteemed companies both within Nigeria and internationally, catering to the specific requests of our clients. We have forged partnerships with renowned ATOs worldwide, such as Flight Safety, Acass, Lufthansa Avia on training, and

Simaero, which enhance our capabilities in developing and expanding the skillset of our pilots. We have distinguished ourselves by specialising in scheduling precise aircraft type ratings and inspiring young individuals to embark on a career path as professional pilots.

How is business aviation in Nigeria, and how do you see it growing?

Business aviation in Nigeria and Africa holds great potential, especially for reaching remote areas that commercial airlines struggle to access.

This sector effectively connects passengers to key airport locations. However, doing business in Africa faces challenges due to slow aircraft operation clearances, with many requests denied due to permit delays, unlike the smoother processes in Europe and America.

African-registered aircraft have more freedom in European and American airspace. Despite efforts like the Yamoussoukro Accord to ease operations between West African countries, implementation is lacking.

Creating an agency like EUROCONTROL could significantly boost African business aviation, but this goal seems distant currently.

What are the challenges the company faces?

Delays in obtaining flight permits hinder operations and revenue. Streamlining this process is crucial for efficiency. Access to credit is another issue; financial institutions don't understand the industry's complexities, deterring investment despite its financial potential. Improving bank-industry relations could foster growth and economic benefits. Foreign exchange rate disparities and difficulty accessing dollars through the central bank also pose problems. Payments in dollars are essential, but reliance on the Nigerian Naira causes losses, especially during maintenance.

What does a typical day involve for you in your role?

I prioritise a strong partnership with the operations team. This collaboration provides insight into daily operations, allowing me to apply my expertise as a seasoned captain to enhance our services. With experience in both commercial and private aviation, I address clients' unique requests with precision. Business aviation requires a personalised approach, as each client has distinct needs. Our flight operations team excels in this environment, showing adaptability and skill. By leveraging my background in flight operations, I offer strategic guidance that strengthens our team.

“Doing business in Africa faces challenges due to slow aircraft operation clearances, with many requests denied due to permit delays.”





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