



**Keynote address by Dr. Taïeb Chérif,
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International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)
at the 14th Annual Conference of the
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Maîtriser le changement : La grande transition

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It is an honour for me to address such a distinguished audience.

The title of this Conference – *Maîtriser le changement : La grande transition* – is a fascinating one indeed.

Throughout this four-day event, various speakers and participants enlightened us with options for mastering change, while dealing with the myriad issues that confront our governments, industries and citizens. In my address today, I would like to showcase the development of civil aviation as a successful example of global societal transformation, some of the lessons learned, and challenges that lie ahead for aviation and our society as a whole.

Civil aviation is assuredly one of the greatest agents of change in history. Within a few short decades, we moved from a ground-based to sky-driven society, conquering distance and time along the way. As the global regulator, ICAO has been privileged to play a pivotal role in this extraordinary leap forward, as the forum for States and stakeholders to successfully manage, in a highly synergistic manner, a wide range of complex, interrelated and rapidly-evolving technical and operational factors – an example of not only effectively managing change but provoking and anticipating change.

Today, air transport is an essential component of our global village. It is a powerful catalyst for economic, social, cultural and political change worldwide.

I would say that most of you who came to this conference by air probably had no second thought about taking a flight. The reason is that air travel is the safest, most secure and most efficient mode of mass transportation available.

In 1947, there were roughly 21 million passengers on the world's fledgling airlines. In 2007, there were more than 2.1 billion passengers on scheduled flights alone, yet there were fewer accidents and fewer fatalities than in 1947. Given the dramatic growth of aviation during those 60 years, it can be said that aviation safety improved at least a hundred times.

Aviation security is also as good as ever. Since 11 September 2001, ICAO and other aviation and law enforcement stakeholders have worked diligently to protect the integrity of air travel. From 2002 to 2007, there were on average about two actual seizures of aircraft annually, far fewer than in the peak years of hijackings.

Reducing the impact of aviation on the environment is another remarkable achievement. New aircraft today are at least 70 % more energy efficient than when the jet age was just taking off in the 1960s. Although noise is still a concern at some airports, modern jet aircraft are also much quieter than their predecessors.

The linking of computer and satellite technologies have produced extraordinarily accurate air navigation systems that have not only increased the safety of operations, but led to more direct and shorter air routes. This means less fuel burn and less greenhouse-gas-producing aircraft emissions.

By all accounts, air travel is an incredible human achievement in terms of reliability and efficiency. What made it all possible is unflinching adherence to key principles: strong political will, universal cooperation among all parties concerned, and an emphasis on dealing up front with sometimes very demanding issues.

Over the next 15 years, air traffic worldwide is expected to increase on average by some 5.8 % annually, much higher in some part of the world. This could translate into 4 billion passengers annually.

Safety will of course remain our top priority. ICAO will continue to focus on technical and operational improvements while moving ahead in a more holistic manner, taking into account economic, social and geopolitical realities. We are increasingly tackling safety issues in an integrated fashion, addressing problems at source and investing precious resources where they are most likely to produce concrete and lasting results.

More people passing through airports will increase the need for security measures. The simple threat of terror is enough to cause operational problems such as flight delays and cancellations, lead to more expensive accident insurance and perhaps deter people from travelling. Our strategy will remain to ensure the highest level of security while accelerating the flow of passengers at airports, so as not to inhibit the health and growth of the air transport industry.

There will be a need as well for high performance air navigation systems to cope with the anticipated airspace congestion. In some regions, congestion has already reached critical levels. ICAO is actively pursuing the implementation of a Global Air Navigation Plan that over the next 25 years or so will contribute to ensuring the safe, efficient and sustainable operation of the highways in the sky that currently accommodate thousands of commercial, business and leisure aircraft, at any given time.

The coming on stream of some 17,000 new aircraft over the next decade or so will also require the training of some 210,000 pilots and 430,000 mechanics, in addition to air traffic controllers and managers for organizations that will hire them all. This may be one of our biggest challenges.

We will need to build new airports and expand or modernize existing ones to cope with the increasing volume of passenger and cargo traffic. The issue of airport capacity is the most urgent and important problem facing the industry in North East Asia in both the short- and long-term. Looking ahead, China has announced investments of 62 billion dollars related to 97 new airports to be completed by 2020 and the number of airports able to handle 30 million passengers a year will grow from 3 to 13. The sustained growth of air transport in India is generating plans for important airport construction and expansion as well. Overall, an improved financial situation experienced by major airports in recent years has renewed the interest of investors prompting some airports to embark on large-scale development projects.

Finally, the steady increase in flights will require even more intense efforts to reduce greenhouse gas producing emissions. Even though civil aviation represents less than 3% of the total world output of CO₂ induced greenhouse gas emissions, we are pushing ahead with every technical and operational measure possible to reduce its impact. ICAO has just introduced a new Carbon Calculator, an impartial and internationally-approved tool to estimate the amount of carbon dioxide from aircraft engine emissions on any given flight, which will assist in the use of carbon-offsetting programmes. The Calculator supports the United Nations Carbon Neutral Initiative which calls for all UN agencies to determine their total carbon emissions. On an ongoing basis, ICAO works in close cooperation with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Environment Programme.

Having said all of this, there is another, far greater and immediate challenge that is threatening the very existence of many airlines and overall health of the industry. Mr. Giovanni Bisignani, Director General and CEO of IATA, the International Air Transport Association, was quite clear in his assessment of the situation at his Association's AGM last week in Istanbul.

In 2007, the industry recorded its first profit since 2000, the result of a 19% improvement in fuel efficiency and an 18% reduction in non-fuel costs. The spreading impact of the US credit crunch, combined with rapidly escalating oil prices, would push the industry back into the red. For every dollar the price of oil goes up, costs go up by US\$1.6 billion.

Many airlines have taken immediate steps in response to the rapid increase in oil prices, such as retiring older, less energy efficient aircraft, abandoning non-productive routes and reducing the workforce. In the medium to long term, other avenues can be explored. The successful drive to modernise and simplify the business with technology needs to be accelerated.

Even though ICAO has no direct implication in the price of oil and related operating costs, we will continue to help make the airline industry as efficient and cost-effective as possible. Ultimately, all concerned stakeholders have a role to play in the return to profitability and sustainable future of the industry.

ICAO is hopeful that the industry will once again demonstrate its traditional resilience and overcome this latest challenge. I am less confident, however, about the future of our society that air transport strives to serve.

As CEO of ICAO, I am privileged to participate in the Chief Executives Board of the United Nations, chaired by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. In these high-level meetings, we update ourselves on the wide range of crucial issues in which the UN and its agencies are involved. These include the current food crisis, climate change, military conflicts, pestilence and disease, access to safe drinking water and many others affecting the lives of billions of people. Every time, I am struck by the interconnectedness of the issues and by the fact that the one thing they have in common is the level of human suffering.

For example:

- three billion people subsist on less than three dollars a day;
- two billion suffer from malnutrition;
- 860 million go to bed hungry almost every day; and
- nine million die each year.

Humans have extracted from the bowels of the earth in only a few decades what has taken Nature billions of years to create. Not only does this kind of development pit humans against humans, it also threatens the flora and fauna, which ensure humanity's well-being. Although we depend on the health of our environment, we insist, ironically, on destroying it at breakneck speed.

According to a study presented at the UN Conference on Biodiversity last week in Bonn, the erosion of the diversity of animal and plant life costs between 2 trillion and 4.7 trillion dollars per year.

If we insist on continuing to alter Nature's internal balance, we should fear the apocalyptic vengeance it could unleash upon us. We can only hope that degradation of the environment, and more specifically biodiversity, have not reached the point of no return otherwise, any remedial measures taken by humans would be doomed to fail.

The 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal said that “man is a slave to distraction”. He believed that, in order to escape from his human condition, man immerses himself in distraction. We could add that today, man is slave, indeed, hostage, to indiscriminate growth. Our obsession with growth at any price appears to have marginalized and dehumanized us. Witness the recent food shortages due in part to the production of biofuel from corn and described by some as a “crime against humanity”. According to other observers, the cruel limits of the deregulation of international trade are evidenced by the appearance of a new threat: the food war of the 21st century.

It seems to me that in this 21st century, the world is faced with a fundamental choice. We can either continue to escape, on the way to our own demise, or we can bravely take our destiny into our own hands and initiate a new world order which will put humans at the centre of development: a new world order based on ethics, equity and human solidarity.

We must, of course, be realistic. While this more humanistic approach to development will not happen overnight, we have to initiate the process now. As I mentioned earlier with aviation, we need to demonstrate strong political will, universal cooperation, and the courage to face reality.

Ban Ki-moon stressed in a viewpoint published recently in Time Magazine, that “Many of the challenges we face, from poverty to armed conflict, are linked to the effects of global warming. Finding a solution to climate change can bring benefits in other areas. A greener planet will be a more peaceful and prosperous one too.”

He went on to explain that “the basic building block of peace and security for all people is economic and social security, anchored in sustainable development. It is a key to all problems... because it allows us to address all the great issues – poverty, climate, environment and political stability – as parts of a whole.”

That strategy is reflected in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals which together form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions. What they require is a fundamental shift in attitude.

The American philosopher and inventor Buckminster Fuller, creator of the geodesic dome which was the US pavilion at Expo 67 held in Montreal, put it this way. We must think of the planet as “Spaceship Earth”. On Spaceship Earth, there are no passengers – we are all crew. We all have a role to play. And do what we may, we cannot escape. We are stuck here. So let’s make sure we maintain Spaceship Earth in top working order, so that everyone on board may live and prosper, now and for generations to come.

Ladies and gentlemen, next year’s Conférence de Montréal will focus on new world realities. Let us look to that conference as an opportunity to explore and define the way forward, where human beings are at the very core of our economic, social and political systems.

Because, in the end, it is not so much a question of knowing, for example, whether the world’s oil and gas reserves are sufficient to meet global demand this century; it is more a question of whether, in the not too distant future, humankind will still exist.
