INTERNATIONAL CIVIL AVIATION ORGANIZATION

First Meeting of the Africa - Indian Ocean Aviation System Planning and Implementation Group (AASPG/1)

Libreville, Gabon, 3 - 7 November 2025

Agenda Item 4: Implementation of safety and air navigation goals, targets and indicators, including priorities set in the Regional Aviation Safety and Air Navigation Plans

4.7. Other Aviation Safety and Air Navigation initiatives

PROTECTION OF AVIATION PERSONNEL IN CONFLICT ZONES IN THE AFI REGION

Presented by the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA)

SUMMARY
This Working Paper highlights the increasing threat that armed conflicts pose to aviation personnel particularly Air Traffic Control Officers (ATCOs) and to critical Air Traffic Management (ATM) facilities in the Africa–Indian Ocean (AFI) Region. Confirmed incidents in several parts of the region demonstrate serious violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), endangering lives, disrupting essential air transport, and hindering the safe development of aviation.
The paper analyses the implications of such incidents on flight safety and proposes a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach anchored in IFATCA's long-standing advocacy for professional protection, safety culture, and human performance to safeguard aviation personnel and infrastructure.
Actions by the meeting are presented in paragraph 3 of this paper

Strategic Objectives	**A- Aviation Safety, B-Air Navigation Capacity and Efficiency** and **C-Aviation** S**ecurity**

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Air transport remains a cornerstone of global mobility, humanitarian assistance, and economic progress. In the AFI Region, aviation is a lifeline that connects communities and sustains development.

1.2   The safety and reliability of this network depend on aviation professionals, notably air traffic control officers (ATCOs), whose skill and vigilance maintain the integrity of the airspace. The supporting infrastructure, systems, and technology are equally indispensable to Air Traffic Management (ATM) operations.

1.3   Despite the protection afforded to civilian personnel and facilities under the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), armed conflicts in some parts of the region increasingly disregard these norms. This Working Paper underscores the resulting threats to aviation personnel and infrastructure and calls for collective, harmonised action to address them.

2. DISCUSSION

Escalating Threats to ATM Integrity in the AFI Region

2.1   Armed confrontations and internal instability have at times affected aviation facilities in the region, leading to incidents of deliberate or collateral damage to control towers and communication systems, and also to instances of unauthorized transmissions on air traffic control (ATC) frequencies. These developments compromise the safety of international civil aviation and the delivery of humanitarian services.

2.2   Beyond armed violence, operational fragility has also been demonstrated during industrial or civil disruptions affecting Air Traffic Services (ATS). These situations illustrate the vulnerability of the human component of ATM and the far-reaching safety implications of threats to personnel security or welfare.

2.3   Such occurrences represent breaches of the protective status owed to civil aviation under international law, specifically Article 57 of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions.

Consequences for Flight Safety and Personnel Well-being

2.4   **Operational Disruptions:** Attacks or instability affecting ATC facilities often necessitate airspace closures and the activation of contingency routes, leading to traffic congestion in adjacent sectors. This unplanned workload increases the risk of operational error and undermines flight safety.

2.5   **Psychological Impact:** ATCOs exposed to threats of violence or instability experience heightened stress, anxiety, and trauma, which degrade concentration and performance. IFATCA's policies on Human Performance and Peer Support highlight the need for comprehensive protection, counselling, and resilience programmes for affected controllers.

2.6   **Long-term Consequences:** Persistent insecurity deters investment, delays modernization, and erodes regional confidence in air navigation services. Such effects impede the safe and orderly growth of aviation, contrary to ICAO's and IFATCA's shared objectives.

Legal and Institutional Gaps

2.7   While IHL explicitly prohibits the targeting of civilian personnel and infrastructure, its provisions are not consistently invoked to safeguard ATM facilities.

2.8   ICAO's Annex 17 (Security: Safeguarding International Civil Aviation Against Acts of Unlawful Interference) and Doc 9985 (ATM Security Manual) address threats such as terrorism but not the scale of violence seen in armed conflict. There remains a legal and policy gap concerning the explicit recognition of ATCOs as neutral, non-combatant professionals requiring protection equivalent to humanitarian workers.

2.9   IFATCA has, through its Policy Statements on the Safety and Responsibility of the Controller, consistently emphasized the non-political, humanitarian nature of the ATCO's role and the obligation of States and employers to ensure safe and secure working conditions.

A Collective and Preventive Approach

2.10   **Recognition of Neutrality:** Civil ATC services are essential to public safety and humanitarian operations. ATCOs should be explicitly recognized as neutral and protected persons under IHL.

2.11   **Contingency and Continuity Planning:** Regionally coordinated contingency frameworks should provide not only for rerouting and airspace management but also for emergency evacuation, safe relocation of staff, and safeguarding of operational data and equipment.

2.12   **Monitoring and Accountability:** ICAO, in partnership with States and regional bodies, should consider mechanisms for documenting and reporting attacks on aviation personnel and facilities to ensure accountability and prevention of recurrence.

2.13   **Personnel Welfare:** ANSPs should develop and implement welfare, peer support, and psychological assistance programmes, in line with global best practices and relevant IFATCA's policies on Professional Responsibility and Mental Health Support.

3. ACTION BY THE MEETING

3.1   The Meeting is invited to note the contents of this Working Paper and:

   a) Encourage States of the AFI region to reinforce national frameworks explicitly protecting ATM facilities and ATCOs under IHL.

   b) Promote regional harmonization of contingency plans for ATC operations in conflict-affected areas, including provisions for personnel safety and continuity of service.

c) Establish or designate a mechanism within ICAO or regional safety groups to record and monitor incidents of violence or interference involving aviation personnel.

d) Recognize ATC services for international civil aviation as non-military, humanitarian functions and encourage States to grant ATCOs protective status consistent with IHL.

e) Encourage States to strengthen physical security measures for ATM installations in accordance with ICAO Doc 9985, while acknowledging that such measures complement but do not replace legal protection.

f) Encourage the ANSPs to implement welfare and psychosocial support systems for ATCOs deployed in high-threat environments, in alignment with IFATCA's Human Performance and Safety Culture policies.

g) Promote the continuous engagement between ANSPs with staff associations and professional bodies to foster trust, transparency, and resilience in crisis conditions.

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