



International Civil Aviation Organization
Asia and Pacific Office

**Twenty-third Meeting of the Asia Pacific Regional Aviation Safety Team
(APRAST/23)**

(Bangkok, Thailand, 7 to 11 April 2025)

Agenda Item 4: Presentations – State / Industry / ICAO

**CERTIFICATION OF GROUND HANDLING AGENCIES (GHA)
UNDER THE PURVIEW OF SAFETY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (SMS)**

(Presented by Pakistan)

SUMMARY

Aerodrome operators are responsible for providing ground handling services to aircraft, which include catering, refueling, cargo loading and unloading, passenger embarkation and disembarkation, aircraft pushback, towing, and other essential operations. These services are delivered by designated or contracted Ground Handling Agencies (GHAs).

Incidents occurring during GHA operations have raised significant safety concerns, posing risks to both aircraft and their occupants. While ICAO Annex 19 outlines Safety Management System (SMS) implementation requirements for operational personnel, GHAs are not currently subject to SMS certification requirements. As a result, the quality and safety of ground handling processes and services cannot be effectively assured.

This discussion paper proposes the inclusion of certification requirements for GHAs under the SMS framework. It is recommended that ICAO consider amending Annex 1 (Personnel Licensing) and Annex 14, Volume I (Aerodromes) to establish regulatory provisions ensuring the safety and quality of ground handling operations

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The history of aviation will always remember the 2001 Concorde accident, which was caused by a metal strip left behind during a baggage handling operation by a Ground Handling Agency (GHA). This Foreign Object Debris (FOD) reached the active runway due to inadequate FOD management, ultimately leading to the tragic event.

1.2. The risk of ground collisions remains ever-present, whether resulting in minor incidents or major accidents on the apron or taxiways. Effective precautionary and control measures must be implemented in both air and ground operations to minimize such risks.

1.3. Safety data analysis further highlights these concerns. Audit findings from the IATA Safety Audit for Ground Operations (ISAGO) indicate that 40% of the top ten observations raised by auditors are related to deficiencies in Safety Management Systems (SMS).

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. Role of Ground Handling Agencies (GHAs) in Aircraft Operations

- a) Ground Handling Agencies (GHAs) play a crucial role in ensuring the timely and efficient departure and arrival of aircraft. Currently, the responsibility for the safety of GHA operations falls on airlines and aerodrome operators. However, certain GHA functions often overlap with the responsibilities of both, particularly in areas such as Foreign Object Debris (FOD) management, refueling operations, and baggage handling systems (BHS).
- b) The implementation of a Safety Management System (SMS) or Quality Management System (QMS) certification for GHAs can significantly enhance ground safety, thereby improving overall aircraft operational safety. As safety begins on the ground, ensuring standardized and regulated safety measures for GHAs is imperative.

2.2. ICAO Annex 19 and the Definition of Operational Personnel

2.2.1. ICAO Annex 19 (Safety Management) defines the scope of SMS implementation under the category of Operational Personnel, as stated:

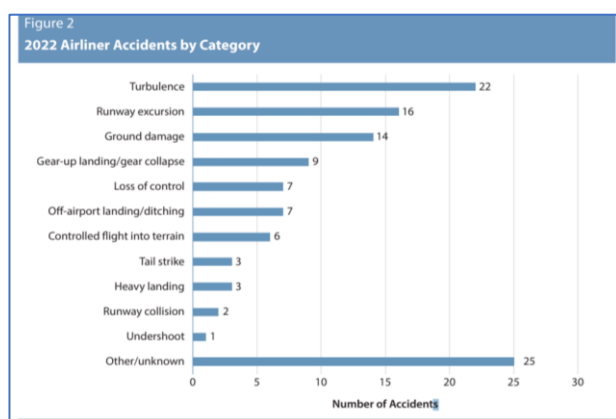
Operational personnel: Personnel involved in aviation activities who are in a position to report safety information. (Note: Such personnel include, but are not limited to, flight crews, air traffic controllers, aeronautical station operators, maintenance technicians, personnel of aircraft design and manufacturing organizations, cabin crews, flight dispatchers, apron personnel, and ground handling personnel).

2.3. Need for SMS Certification for GHAs

- a) While the definition of operational personnel under ICAO Annex 19 includes ground handling personnel, designated or contracted GHAs are not subject to SMS certification requirements. This is because ICAO has not mandated such requirements in Annex 1 (Personnel Licensing) or Annex 14, Volume I (Aerodromes).
- b) The increasing frequency of ground incidents and occurrences highlights a pressing need for regulatory oversight. Without proper SMS implementation and certification, these incidents could escalate into serious accidents, jeopardizing safety on the ground and in flight.

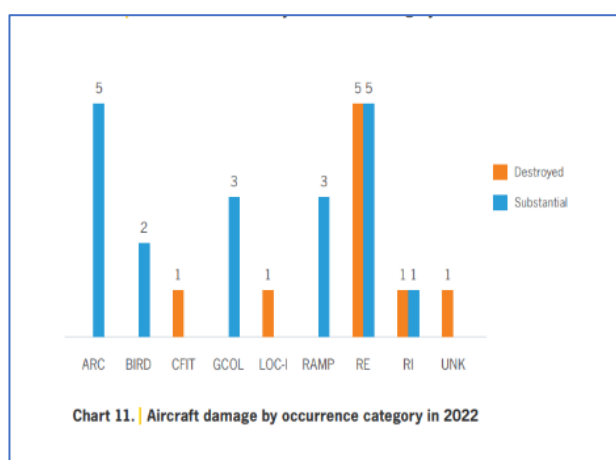
2.4. Safety Reports and the Role of GHAs in Ground Incidents

2.4.1. Safety reports from IATA and ICAO for 2022 and 2023 indicate a significant involvement of GHAs in ground incidents and accidents. These findings underscore the necessity of incorporating GHAs into SMS certification frameworks to mitigate risks and enhance overall aviation safety.



9.1.1 Top ISAGO findings for 2023

No	ISAGO Organisation and Management - Top 10 Findings
1	SMS – integrated and implemented throughout the organization to manage ground ops safety risks
2	SMS – Safety risk assessment and mitigation program throughout the organization
3	Management and control of external and internal documentation
4	Training program – Initial training prior to operational duties
5	GSE Maintenance program
6	QMS and Oversight program to evaluate management system and operations at all stations
7	SMS – Safety assurance program
8	Setting performance objectives and measures
9	Operational documentation communicated, distributed and accessible at all stations and in all operational areas
10	Training program – ensure that trained and competent staff performs basic, advanced, and specific SMS duties



2.5. IATA's ISAGO Certification and Its Impact on GHA Safety

2.5.1. IATA's initiative to establish safety certification for GHAs through the IATA Safety Audit for Ground Operations (ISAGO) is a significant step toward enhancing ground handling safety. Data comparing certified and non-certified GHAs demonstrates a clear reduction in incidents and accidents, highlighting the effectiveness of safety certification in mitigating operational risks.

2.6. Recent GHA-Related Incidents at Pakistani Airports

2.6.1. In the recent past, two to three incidents at Pakistani airports have resulted in minor aircraft damage due to active failures by GHAs. These occurrences underscore the need for stricter oversight and mandatory safety management requirements for ground handling operations.

2.7. Pakistan's Advocacy for SMS Inclusion for GHAs

2.7.1. Pakistan has proactively advocated for the inclusion of GHAs under the purview of Safety Management Systems (SMS). This recommendation was formally submitted during the review of the upcoming version of ICAO Annex 19. Additionally, Pakistan emphasized this need during the 21st Meeting of the Asia Pacific Regional Aviation Safety Team (APRAST) held in Bangkok in March 2024.

3. ACTION BY THE MEETING

3.1. The Meeting is invited to:

- a) IATA/ACI/FSF Support is requested on the proposal for the exclusive SMS implementation / certification for GHAs should be included under the purview of SMS Certification process, with the revision in the charges may be considered at these forums in the interest of ground safety.
- b) States are invited to comment on the proposed subject that GHAs should be embedded in the circle of SMS (Annex-19) and Certification of GHAs may declared as an essential requirements. and if agreed, the ICAO may consider amending Annex 1 – *Personnel Licensing* and / or Annex 14 – *Aerodromes* accordingly.

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