



**Address by the President of the Council of the
International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO),
Mr. Roberto Kobeh González,**

“Challenges facing international civil aviation”

(Madrid, Spain — 28 January 2010)

I am delighted to address such a distinguished audience of government, industry and news media representatives.

I would like to thank the organizers of this event for their kind invitation to share a few thoughts on the challenges facing global air transport from the perspective of the International Civil Aviation Organization.

With your indulgence, I will begin with a brief description of the mandate and role of ICAO.

On 11 September 1944, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt invited the nations of the world to a conference with the purpose of establishing the principles and methods for adopting a new convention for international aviation.

Fifty-two nations, including Spain and a strong European contingent, accepted the invitation and met in Chicago for three weeks to draft and eventually sign, on 7 December, the *Convention on International Civil Aviation*.

It was the Chicago Convention, as it was also called, that created ICAO, with a mandate to ensure the safe and orderly development of international civil aviation.

To this day, ICAO serves as the forum for cooperation in all fields of civil aviation among its 190 Member States in the areas of safety, security, regularity and, as of the late 1960s, environmental protection.

The ICAO process has worked extremely well and remains a model for effective and efficient cooperation among States in achieving common goals and objectives. Underlying this productive relationship is the collective ability to reach and build on consensus, while responding to often widely diverging views and interests. This is all the more impressive since all Member States are recognized by the Convention as having complete and exclusive sovereignty over the airspace above their territory.

After 65 years, international civil aviation is as safe, secure and sustainable as it has ever been.

- The rate of accidents on scheduled flights last year was one of the lowest since the creation of ICAO.
- The number of acts of unlawful interference and terrorism following the events of 11 September 2001 is at a historic low.
- The fact that jet aircraft today are at least 70 percent more fuel efficient and much quieter than their predecessors of the late 1960s is a tribute to the determination and combined efforts of governments and industry alike to minimize the negative impact of aviation on the environment.

And so, with such impressive results, what can be the challenges facing international civil aviation?

I will answer by taking each of safety, security and the environment in sequence, beginning with safety.

Air travel today is regarded justifiably as the safest mode of mass transportation. Our steady march to optimum safety has meant successfully meeting challenges in the areas of technology, human factors, and organizational structure and culture. It has meant integrating solutions into a global regulatory framework that, to this day, allows civil aviation administrations, operators, manufacturers and other stakeholders to work together in the development and implementation of globally harmonized safety standards, procedures and practices.

In some way, we have perhaps become the victims of our own success. We now face increased pressure to sustain and improve those levels, in the face of new and demanding circumstances.

Our challenge now is to develop and implement new approaches to the management of safety, as well as processes required to implement the new approaches. We need to complement our traditional yet essential prescriptive-based methodology with a proactive, performance-based approach.

This will be our goal at a High-level Safety Conference convened by ICAO for the end of March. I am happy to add that the Spanish Presidency will lead the presence of Europe at this meeting, where we will lay the foundation for measures and programmes designed to anticipate potential shortcomings and prevent accidents.

One of the ways will be to further strengthen our ability to help States discharge their responsibilities for safety oversight in their respective territory. This is important because of the close correlation between the consistent implementation of regulations and the occurrence of accidents.

We have a strong base upon which to build. In 1999, ICAO launched its Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme to assist Member States assess their capability to oversee their respective air transport systems. For the first time, sovereign States authorized a UN agency to assess their respective capabilities to oversee the implementation of agreed-upon international standards on their territory.

The Programme proved successful from the beginning in identifying and helping correct deficiencies in national safety oversight systems. It was expanded in 2004 and another milestone was reached in 2006 when Member States unanimously agreed to have audit results posted on the ICAO public website. This was a tacit recognition that transparency is fundamental to a safe air transport system. It also sensitized potential donors, be they States, industry or international organizations, to how they could assist in funding and applying corrective measures.

The next phase in the evolution of the safety oversight system will be the introduction of a continuous monitoring approach. It will consist of an on-line reporting and data management system that will enable ICAO to monitor the safety oversight capabilities of Contracting States on an ongoing basis. It will also make it possible to assess the safety level of aviation activities and to evaluate safety management capabilities in a harmonized and consistent manner.

Another initiative deals with the sharing of information in advancing the cause of aviation safety. Considerable safety information has been amassed over the years by different stakeholders, many of them represented in this room. The problem is that information gathered from State and industry audits, accident investigations, flight safety analyses, independent reporting and research is not shared effectively.

With modern communications technology so readily available, there is no reason why safety data cannot be efficiently disseminated throughout the international safety community. This could lead to more targeted regulations, better operating procedures and best practices. ICAO is solidly behind the concept and is looking forward to serious discussions on the creation of a global safety information exchange at the March conference.

I hasten to add that, as we move in that direction, we must ensure the steady flow of safety information by balancing the protection of data with the administration and delivery of State legal systems.

Among the other issues we will be considering in March are safety initiatives arising from recent and as of yet unexplained accidents, such as the Air France flight between Brazil and France last year. We must look at improving search and rescue, training and recovery of accident data when accidents occur over seas and in other remote or inaccessible areas. I am personally concerned about the potential lack of trained aviation professionals that will result from the retirement of vast numbers of pilots, mechanics, controllers and cabin crew in the coming years.

As you can see, in spite of an enviable track record, the road ahead for aviation safety is both challenging and exciting.

Another major challenge for aviation, one that is at once insidious and more difficult to deal with, is security.

The attempted sabotage of Northwest Airlines flight 253 on 25 December brought us back to the reality that terrorists can strike not only anywhere and at any time, but also in new and different ways. It was also a reminder that security threats transcend national boundaries and must be addressed through a global strategy based on effective international cooperation led by ICAO, with the support of Member States.

Within hours of the attempted bombing, ICAO was in contact with high-level officials of States involved and initiated a series of actions to coordinate and harmonize responses to the terrorist act. We communicated with security authorities in all of our Member States to encourage them to conduct risk assessments and implement appropriate screening measures.

As we speak, ICAO remains in close contact with its Member States and industry to facilitate and implement a solid response to this latest threat.

Obviously, the decision to implement emergency measures is never easy because of the enormous impact on air transport operations in terms of costs, delays and inconvenience. Events like the 25 December bombing attempt, however, clearly justify more stringent procedures to protect the integrity of the system and maintain public confidence in air travel.

I take this opportunity to commend the States concerned for their quick and decisive action to contain the situation. Although the measures imposed were onerous and disruptive, the magnitude of the threat justified the measures taken.

Our task is now to review existing measures or strategies and assess whether they are still relevant. If necessary, they must be adapted to new threats or eliminated and replaced by new ones. At ICAO, this work is performed by the Aviation Security Panel, a multinational team of security experts. At their next meeting in March, they are expected to produce concrete recommendations on how to prevent incidents such as the attempted sabotage of 25 December. They will be looking at both procedural and technological solutions, including the possible use of imaging technology – commonly referred to as body scanners – as one means of screening passengers, taking into account privacy, data protection and health issues.

Over the longer term, the fundamental challenge is to achieve and maintain an optimum balance between more stringent security measures and facilitating air travel by 2.3 billion passengers per year. The challenge becomes more complicated when different States implement different measures. That is why a multilateral, harmonized approach is more likely to avoid confusing passengers while making more efficient and effective efforts by States and industry to strengthen the security of the air transport system. Collaboration is vital and initiatives such as one-stop security should be encouraged.

The other consideration is that every time a new type of incident arises, we face the prospect of introducing yet another layer of security. We obviously must do so when necessary, but without imposing undue burdens on the industry. Countermeasures to new threats must be practical as well as appropriate for the level of threat.

This is a never-ending proposition. Air transport is likely to remain an attractive target for terrorist organizations because of its critical importance to our global society. By remaining proactive, we can ensure that civil aviation's vulnerabilities are not exploited by terrorists. The health of the air transport industry, and its ability to support economic and social development around the world, are at stake.

The third major challenge we face is the environment.

As I alluded to at the beginning of my remarks, aviation has an enviable record in reducing the impact of noise and emissions from aircraft. As with safety and security, we know that it is also a never-ending challenge, especially with regard to climate change.

Moreover, while aviation represents only 2 percent of total CO₂ produced from human activity, it is highly visible and that makes us an easy target for criticism, as we have seen in news reports and public declarations over the past year especially as we were getting closer to the climate change talks in Copenhagen last December.

What has not been widely reported, but which is of great significance, is that in the months leading up to Copenhagen, aviation produced under the leadership of ICAO the first and to date only globally harmonized agreement to address climate change from a sector. Part of that process was a high-level meeting of States representing 93 percent of commercial air traffic last October, at which agreement was reached on how governments will further work together and with industry to reduce aviation's impact on climate change. This includes a goal of 2 percent annual improvement in fuel efficiency until the year 2050; a CO₂ standard for aircraft; a framework for market-based measures in international aviation; and measures to facilitate access by developing States to financial resources, technology transfer and capacity-building.

The fact that a deal on international aviation and maritime fuels unfortunately was not reached in Copenhagen makes aviation's unified position even more relevant.

But it is just another step on the road to sustainability. Beginning on 1 February, the ICAO Committee on Aviation and Environmental Protection will consider even more stringent provisions for reducing the impact of aviation on the environment. This will be followed in May by an Environmental Colloquium and the 37th Session of the ICAO Assembly in the fall when, I believe, Member States will want to strengthen even more some of those measures.

I can assure you that ICAO will continue to assume its leadership and move forward with its aggressive plan of action to combat climate change in order to achieve an environmentally sustainable air transport system – one that is also safe, secure, and resilient.

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to comment on the specific challenge of the air transport industry in these difficult economic times. Liberalization is seen, and we agree, as part of the answer to the present crisis.

For the past two decades, ICAO has provided guidance and assistance to States in their liberalization efforts and to help an environment in which international air transport may develop and flourish in a stable, efficient and economic manner without compromising safety and security.

As more and more States have embraced liberalization, using national, bilateral, regional, and plurilateral approaches, we see a positive trend towards multilateralism. At the same time, many more States and industry want to quicken the pace of liberalization. Our challenge is now to encourage and make it easier for States to come on board.

That is also our commitment – to continue to promote, facilitate and assist in the liberalization process, by working together with States, the air transport industry and other stakeholders in civil aviation.

The common aspiration and goal of our endeavour should remain to give international air transport as much economic freedom as possible, while respecting its specific characteristics and ensuring high standards of safety, security and environmental sustainability.