



**Opening address by the President of the Council of the
International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO),
Mr. Roberto Kobeh González,
to the African Ministerial Conference on Aviation Safety**

(Abuja, Nigeria – 19 July 2012)

It is a great honour for me to address the opening of this African Ministerial Conference on Aviation Safety. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts and aspirations with persons in such high positions of authority and influence.

This is important because at the heart of our discussions here in Abuja will be the operational integrity of African air transport and its continued ability to drive sustainable economic and social development.

Across the continent, air transport is responsible for 6.7 million jobs and contributes 67.8 billion dollars to the Gross Domestic Product. That figure is expected to increase by 5 per cent annually over the next 20 years. For many of the nations you represent, air transport is the only viable connection to the lucrative global marketplace.

Clearly, Africa cannot do without quality air transport. At the same time, your responsibility is to ensure that air travel remains safe. It is a fact that a single accident can destroy an airline almost overnight while it takes years to restore a tarnished safety record for both carriers and countries. Building trust with the travelling public is one of your greatest challenges, just as it is in other parts of the world.

Everywhere, safety must be the first priority. This is why aviation safety is ICAO's guiding Strategic Objective. Our goal is for air navigation and regulatory developments to keep pace with and, ultimately, stay ahead of the demands of air traffic growth. Otherwise, as traffic grows, so will the number of accidents and fatalities.

In the case of Africa, traffic growth projections are promising. ICAO's latest forecast is for international scheduled passenger traffic to grow at an annual average growth rate of 3.9 per cent until 2030 and for domestic passenger traffic to increase at a rate of 4.7 per cent a year over the same period. The African aviation industry must therefore put in place a solid strategic planning process for safe and efficient operations, both nationally and regionally. Such a process must include continuous and measurable targets, with corresponding investments.

Moreover, all aviation stakeholders — international and regional organizations, industry partners, development banks, investors and States — must collaborate, as a matter of priority, towards a common objective: to correct significant safety concerns and deficiencies that currently threaten the progress of civil aviation and, as a consequence, the growth of economies in Africa.

I am fully aware of the enormous political and economic pressures involved, which is the reason I stress on the establishment of autonomous civil aviation authorities empowered to act without political interference; and that means that you may not issue an air operator certificate unless a thorough and documented process has been satisfactorily completed.

For its part, ICAO has worked closely with African States on a comprehensive plan to resolve safety deficiencies. Under this framework, ICAO Regional Offices in Dakar and Nairobi will be your focal points for carrying out the planned corrective measures.

In this way, we can respond more effectively with technical and financial resources that States need to comply with safety standards and obligations under the *Convention on International Civil Aviation*. Among the elements of the Plan are:

- the establishment and maintenance of regional safety oversight and accident investigation organizations;
- a framework for the harmonization of training courses in the region;
- guidance material to assist States meet their safety oversight responsibilities at the national and regional levels; and
- the establishment of the AFI Regional Aviation Safety Group.

We will be reviewing these initiatives and others in detail during this Ministerial Conference but allow me to briefly emphasize two of them.

The first is the AFI Plan, which was adopted by the ICAO Council, endorsed by the Assembly in 2007 and enthusiastically supported by African States.

Under the leadership of ICAO, the Plan calls for collaboration between regulatory agencies and industry to implement a series of actions aimed at resolving safety deficiencies in African States. Through the AFI Plan, donors and development banks have allocated financial resources to:

- a) enable States to establish and maintain a safety oversight system;
- b) assist States to resolve identified deficiencies within a reasonable time; and
- c) promote an aviation safety culture within African aviation service providers.

The second initiative I wish to highlight is the development of plans of action. The Air Navigation Bureau of ICAO and Regional Offices jointly conceived these plans for States where significant safety concerns or serious safety deficiencies were identified during ICAO safety audits. The Plans were presented to the ministers responsible for civil aviation in States concerned. To date, all 20 States have accepted the plans. That is very encouraging.

The reality, however, is that developing nations sometimes find it difficult to secure adequate funding to carry out the required solutions and for which they are nevertheless responsible. Fortunately, donors and assistance providers can and do take advantage of various funding mechanisms to fill the gap.

One is the newly created Safety Fund designed to improve civil aviation safety using a performance-based approach to determine assistance. In addition, the ICAO Safety Collaborative Assistance Network, also known as SCAN website, allows donors to identify projects that require funding. This website provides a convenient list of accepted plans of action that I mentioned earlier.

Whatever the mechanism used, what is absolutely essential is that States identify resources arising from aviation charges for adequate and stable funding, on an ongoing basis, of safety initiatives.

The good news is that all of these efforts and more by African States, and regional and international organizations, are getting results. A very good example comes from Nigeria, where commitment and political will to resolve safety deficiencies have focussed on strengthening ICAO international safety standards for aircraft operations and maintenance. A number of carriers registered in Nigeria, such as Arik Air, can now offer direct flights to Europe and the United States for the first time in many years.

Still, despite our best intentions and actions to improve safety, aviation holds a certain degree of risk. This was illustrated by the unfortunate events near Lagos barely six weeks ago. To their credit, Nigerian civil aviation authorities responded quickly, in accordance with ICAO accident investigation procedures. I was further reassured to learn that proper assistance was given to the Nigerian aviation community to determine the probable causes of the accident, so that similar events do not reoccur.

I can assure you that the international aviation community will support any and all States that demonstrate this kind of political will to address aviation safety challenges in its territory.

As will become evident during this Ministerial Conference, this is totally in line with the mission of ICAO – to work in collaboration with Member States, regional safety oversight organizations, industry partners and other stakeholders to create a safer global air transport system.

Our collective goal should be to reduce not only the global aviation accident rate and related fatalities, but also the variance in safety performance among States and regions. In other words, making aviation the safest mode of transportation everywhere, so that any person can feel safe wherever she or he flies around the globe.

At this conference, I am looking for your commitment and partnership in implementing our plan in Africa and establishing safety targets that will measure our progress.

For some States, the immediate action will be to deal with significant national safety concerns or to improve fundamental safety oversight capabilities. For others, the action should be to collaborate in establishing regional safety oversight or accident investigation organizations. For all, it should be to share best practices and provide the necessary support to those in need.

Ladies and gentlemen, the world believes in the potential of Africa. The world needs for Africa to succeed. It is up to all of us, together, to make sure that air transport leads the way to African prosperity and wellbeing for all of its citizens. In that spirit, I wish you a most constructive conference.