



WORKING PAPER

ASSEMBLY — 42ND SESSION

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Agenda Item 12: Facilitation Programmes

HUMANITARIAN FLIGHTS

(Presented by Saudi Arabia)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of aviation in humanitarian response is becoming critical. Swift transportation of aid and relief by air is essential for effective disaster response and recovery. Humanitarian flights continue to face fragmented access, delayed clearances and inconsistent application of charges, hindering timely, life-saving missions.

Action: The Assembly is invited to:

- a) recognize the increasing need to enhance the efficiency of humanitarian action, specifically related to humanitarian flights, at the national, regional and global levels;
- b) urge Member States to give humanitarian missions maximum access to airspace and airports and to exempt humanitarian aviation flights from all operational charges, including landing fees, parking fees, and any taxes or levies imposed when operating to/from airports within their territory;
- c) request the International Civil Aviation Organization Council to establish a Special Task Force to evaluate global practices and propose standard procedures and policies, in consultation with relevant United Nations bodies and aviation stakeholders; and
- d) agree to amend A41-13, as reflected in A42-WP/15 Appendix E.
 - i. Preambular Clause:
“Whereas humanitarian response in major crisis relies heavily on swift transportation aid and relief by air”;
 - ii. Operative Clause 7:
“Urges Member States to give humanitarian missions the maximum access to airspace and airports”;
 - iii. Operative Clause 8:
“Requests the Council to review and enhance the ICAO provisions to facilitate the operations of humanitarian flights”.

<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This working paper relates to Strategic Goal <i>Aviation Delivers Seamless, Accessible and Reliable Mobility for All</i> .
<i>Financial implications:</i>	No additional financial implications.

¹ English and Arabic versions provided by Saudi Arabia.

<i>References:</i>	Doc 10184, <i>Assembly Resolutions in Force (7 October 2022)</i> Annex 9 — <i>Facilitation</i> Annex 1 — <i>Personnel Licensing</i> Annex 6 — <i>Operation of Aircraft</i> Annex 11 — <i>Air Traffic Services</i> Annex 14 — <i>Aerodromes</i> Annex 19 — <i>Safety Management</i> A42-WP/15, <i>Consolidated statement of continuing ICAO policies related to facilitation</i>
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The aviation sector following the COVID-19 pandemic is experiencing growth at a higher rate than previously anticipated. This expansion, while promising, brings with it a unique set of challenges. On the other hand, the frequency of crises affecting the aviation industry is escalating, with incidents like national disasters, fires, health pandemics, armed conflicts, geostrategic tensions and extreme weather conditions becoming increasingly common.

1.2 In this context, the role of aviation in humanitarian response becomes critical. Swift transportation of aid and relief by air is essential for effective disaster response and recovery. Humanitarian flights continue to face fragmented access, delayed clearances and inconsistent application of charges, hindering timely, life-saving missions.

1.3 In the Doha Declaration on Facilitation of International Air Transport, States stressed the need for collaborative frameworks to ensure humanitarian flights operate under optimal conditions, ultimately saving more lives.

1.4 The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has had a substantive role regarding air transport facilitation related to humanitarian matters with ongoing contributions to humanitarian response, including its leadership in developing Facilitation Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs), operational guidance and crisis coordination mechanisms with the United Nations and international partners.

1.5 The ICAO establishment of a dedicated Team across different Bureaus/Offices with the mandate to develop a Crisis Preparedness and Response Framework to facilitate preparedness and response to diverse crisis that disrupt international civil aviation are efficient, coordinated and effective, is welcome.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 As the demand for rapid humanitarian assistance grows, the aviation industry must adapt to ensure that it can meet these challenges head-on, while also continuing its trajectory of growth.

2.2 The significance of having cargo and specialized personnel ready and deployed in a timely manner cannot be overstated, particularly in the aviation sector responding to emergencies. Time becomes

a critical variable in determining the effectiveness of aid delivery; every minute lost can mean the difference between life and death in crisis situations.

2.3 Important challenges must be navigated to ensure that humanitarian operations proceed smoothly. These challenges include the approval of flight plans, access to specific airspace, availability of convenient airports, airport capacity and the coordination of various actors involved in relief efforts. Additionally, adequate communication links are essential for real-time updates and decision-making.

2.4 Further complicating the situation are the operational restrictions on aircraft, mandatory arrival protocols, imposed quarantines and application of charging policies which can hinder the swift delivery of humanitarian assistance.

2.5 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) coordinated hundreds of humanitarian flights that were delayed due to overflight restrictions, lack of clear procedures and inconsistent treatment of relief flights. It is the case that the European Co-ordination Center for Accident and Incident Reporting Systems (ECCAIRS) and ICAO reporting show increased disruptions in aid flights during health and natural disasters.

3. HUMANITARIAN STAKEHOLDERS

3.1 In the United Nations, UNHAS, managed by the World Food Programme (WFP), is the leading operator of humanitarian flights. WHO operates airbridges during pandemics and regional health emergencies, and OCHA coordinates access and clearances for relief flight corridors.

3.2 Saudi Arabia is one of the main Humanitarian Aid and Relief Donors together with United States, European Commission, Japan and Germany.

4. EXISTING FRAMEWORK

4.1 The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2816 (1971) provides a strong legal and political foundation for action in this field and underpins ICAO's role in humanitarian air operations calling on States to facilitate such movements. Standard 8.7 of Annex 9 — *Facilitation* (in Amendment 30, applicable 11 July 2025) to the Chicago Convention acknowledges the importance of humanitarian flights, recommending that States facilitate these operations. Similarly, Assembly Resolution A41-13: *Strategy on disaster risk reduction and response mechanism in aviation* as published in Doc 10184, *Assembly Resolutions in Force (7 October 2022)* recognizes that all States have a vital need for disaster-resilient aviation infrastructure to promote socio-economic development and, in times of need, to support the timely and efficient distribution of aid, while ICAO Annex 1 — *Personnel Licensing*, Annex 6 — *Operation of Aircraft*, Annex 9, Annex 11 — *Air Traffic Services*, Annex 14 — *Aerodromes* and Annex 19 — *Safety Management* provide SARPs relevant to emergency planning and response, including border control formalities and safety management procedures.

4.2 Despite these frameworks, the overall efficiency of the aviation ecosystem in managing humanitarian flights warrants deeper examination. There is a pressing need to facilitate approvals, broaden access to airspace and airports, and establish a consistent and homogeneous application of tariffs and duties around the world.

4.3 It is acknowledged the ICAO's existing collaborations with relevant United Nations Organizations, such as OCHA, WHO, WFP and the World Custom Organization (WCO), especially during

COVID-19 and through initiatives like the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response in Aviation (HADRA) and the ICAO Council's Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART).

4.4 While HADRA was created to generate a strategic plan in 2022, there is still no comprehensive regulatory framework ensuring that global aid/relief efforts by air are protected under ICAO provisions. The global aid community and Member States require further coordination.

4.5 It is acknowledged that humanitarian air access touches on sensitive sovereignty and security concerns. Proposed regulatory improvements must be balanced with respect for States' rights over their sovereign airspace and domestic legal frameworks.

4.6 In order to address standard humanitarian flight clearance process and conditions under which overflight and landing should be granted and exemption provisions from standard tariffs and quarantine measures for pre-cleared humanitarian flights, it is recommended to establish an ICAO-led Special Task Force (STF), supported by the ICAO Secretariat, with representation from interested donor States, United Nations bodies (WFP, OCHA, WHO), and aviation industry groups the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA), Airports Council International (ACI).

4.7 This Special Task Force may conclude by proposing that ICAO explore the establishment of a standing coordination mechanism on humanitarian air transport facilitation including representatives from relevant United Nations agencies, international organizations and Member State.

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