

MEDIA STATEMENT

AASA's renewed concerns with South Africa's aviation infrastructure

30 January 2025, Johannesburg – The Airlines Association of Southern Africa (AASA) notes with renewed concern and frustration the recent rash of incidents that disrupted airline operations over the summer peak travel season and throughout this month.

The incidents are primarily related to the reliability of refuelling infrastructure, electrical power supply and redundancy systems at O.R. Tambo International Airport (ORTIA) and Cape Town International Airport (CTIA). There remains ongoing uncertainty regarding the management of fuel reserves as well as the security of the jet fuel supply. Either way, uncertainty directly impacts the ability of airlines to fulfil their schedule integrity. Airlines are still feeling the adverse impact of the very slow pace of restoring the 326 instrument flight procedures countrywide that Air Traffic & Navigation Services (ATNS) withdrew in July 2024. Add to these concerns last weekend's cyberbreach at the South African Weather Service (SAWS) that has disrupted the provision of aviation weather observations and forecasts which are mission critical for flights.

“Airlines and passengers pay statutory user charges to the various State aviation agencies for the provision of reliable, safe, efficient, and affordable services. However, AASA is concerned that ACSA, ATNS and SAWS applied to their respective economic regulators for new tariff increases when they have been unable to provide the full range of the services they have been paid for. At the same time the airlines are bearing the brunt in terms of ensuring they meet their commitments to their customers by having to provide alternatives for disrupted operations,” said Aaron Munetsi, CEO of AASA.

Fuel

Fuel availability has been a critical item since 2021 when the Durban refinery was damaged in the unrest, followed by floods that wreaked havoc and rendered the railway line between Durban and the Reef unserviceable. The closure of the Astron refinery in Cape Town (it re-opened last July and is still ramping up production) added to the woes.

“These left the industry heavily reliant on imported jet fuel, for which airlines operating within and from South Africa are forced to pay an exorbitant premium reflecting the additional logistics, duties and other costs applied to the fuel before it gets anywhere near an aircraft fuel tank,” he added.

The recent fire at NATREF near Johannesburg, which is the central collection point for jet fuel before it is pumped via a dedicated pipeline to ACSA's storage facility at ORTIA, caused further disruption and heightened concern.

“Earlier this month NATREF assured us the repairs will be completed by 21 February, but it has not provided any progress reports so we have no idea if it will meet that self-imposed deadline. In the meantime, AASA is cautiously comforted by ACSA's assurance that sufficient fuel stock has been

secured to 2 February, but we are also painfully aware that while ACSA owns the storage and refuelling infrastructure and equipment, it does not procure or own fuel,” explained Mr Munetsi.

Fuel procurement is the responsibility of the fuel companies which have commercial supply agreements with the airlines.

However, since the local aviation industry shocks triggered in March 2020 by the COVID-19 lockdown, the fuel suppliers have taken a very conservative approach in their jet fuel inventory management, resulting in a more than halving of the average reserves at ORTIA from 11 days to around four days, which has been sufficient to sustain airline operations.

“AASA is not privy to those individual supply contracts, and they are not made public. However, we note that the NOTAM imposing fuel uplift restrictions, including a ban on flights tankering fuel, from ORTIA (ref. A0237/25 NOTAMN), remains valid until 1pm on 25 February, unless it is withdrawn before then. This suggests neither the fuel suppliers nor ACSA can guarantee the necessary volumes and that, until the shipments arrive at the ORTIA fuel storage depot, we should remain concerned about potential disruptions to operations.”

Unserviceable and obsolete equipment

In addition, there are still too many instances of unserviceable runway and taxiway lights at major airports. There is equipment such as traveller passenger walkways in terminal buildings which remain unavailable after they were switched off during the COVID restrictions. Similarly, we note the ongoing delays and disruptions to passenger processing for both departures and arrivals due to the limited if not completely unavailable e-gates at our airports. These facilities are required for speedy, seamless and digital processing of passenger identify verification as is being done in most countries and is recommended by the Airports Council International and the UN International Civil Aviation Organisation (among other things, ICAO sets worldwide passport and verification standards). The modernisation of the airport management IT system is very slow and was stalled early last year in light of concerns with the tender award.

“While we commend ACSA for its efforts to comply with the Public Finance Management Act, AASA pleads with ACSA, National Treasury and other players in the procurement chain to expedite the processes so that the necessary work is attended to with the urgency it deserves,” said Mr Munetsi.

Suspended Instrument flight procedures, shortage of ATCs

Similarly, in its regular meetings with the Minister of Transport on various aviation related matters, AASA continues to express its members’ frustrations with the delays in processing the approvals to the 326 instrument flight procedures that were withdrawn last July.

“ATNS failed to deliver on its assurances that procedures would be reinstated by the summer peak travel season for priority key airports such as George. As we have seen this week at George, the unavailability of the relevant instrument flight procedure disqualified the use of the Instrument Landing System (ILS) for Runway 11 - the runway in use when the winds are from the East.

This resulted in numerous delayed and cancelled flights to and from George, aggravation for travellers and additional operating costs for airlines,” he explained.

In addition to the withdrawn instrument flight procedures many Area Navigation (RNAV) routes and approaches, numerous standard departure routings for flights taking off from the major airports and for several upper and lower airways and routes between South Africa’s major air traffic control zones remain suspended.

Exacerbating this is the shortage of qualified and experienced air traffic controllers and airspace designers worldwide, which has seen aggressive poaching of South African talent away from ATNS. Operationally this has seen ATNS impose “flow control” in the Johannesburg control area, i.e. limiting the number of aircraft it lets into the airspace at any given time by increasing the gaps between departing and arriving flights, so that the controllers are not overwhelmed.

“Instead of improving safety, the situation poses an increased safety risk. However, travellers should take comfort in the fact that their safety and wellbeing is our member airlines’ operational priority, and they take every possible measure to eliminate any risk, including diverting, delaying or cancelling flights, as inconvenient as those might be,” added Mr Munetsi.

SA Weather Services, cybersecurity

This past weekend’s double breach of the SAWS IT system, which meant they were unable to provide any aviation weather observations or forecasts on Monday (it is still offline but now posting limited forecasts on its X/Twitter feed) is a further aggravation the industry could do without as it is illegal to dispatch a flight without a weather forecast.

“In this day and age, it is imperative that our essential service providers have robust cybersecurity barriers in place, which are tested frequently for gaps, which are then plugged. Fortunately, our member airlines have found alternative workarounds so that operations are not disrupted,” explained Mr Munetsi.

User charges increases

All three of these State aviation service providers are applying to their respective economic regulators for tariff increases.

“AASA’s position is that its members and travellers have been paying top dollar for services that have not been fully reliable and in some cases such as ATNS’s failure to maintain the approval of instrument flight procedures, it collected our money but did not do the work. The regulators should insist on full audits of how those user charges were spent before entertaining any applications for increases,” he stated.



About AASA

AASA represents most of the airlines in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) bloc on matters of common interest relating to government policies, legislation, regulations, planning, operational efficiency, safety, security, taxes, charges, and other matters affecting its Members' sustainability, and the provision of affordable and accessible air transport throughout the region.

AASA was established in 1970 and currently has 17 [Airline Members](#) and 40 [Associate Members](#), including infrastructure service providers, aircraft and engine manufacturers and other industry suppliers, ground handling companies and allied industry bodies.

AASA is a participant and contributor to the [International Civil Aviation Organization \(ICAO\)](#) and the [International Air Transport Association \(IATA\)](#) forums and supports their initiatives in the region.

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