

Air India, Akasa Air CEOs clash verbally over poaching of pilots

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 01 November, 2023



New Delhi : The Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of two Indian airlines, Air India and Akasa Air, are at odds over the poaching of pilots.

Akasa Air's CEO has accused Air India of breaching regulations by enticing its pilots away. In response, Air India has raised concerns that such actions could potentially violate competition laws by suggesting collusion to prevent pilots from changing jobs.

The conflict reveals the increasing competition in India's aviation market, driven by a strong rebound in air travel after the pandemic and a surge in new aircraft orders, which has led to a pilot shortage.

The exchange between the chief executives of the airlines, Campbell Wilson of Air India and Vinay Dube of low-cost airline Akasa, was detailed in a letter dated September 21, seen by a news agency.

The letter was written by Air India CEO Campbell Wilson.

The letter came after a phone conversation between the two executives and a

previous missive from Dube expressing concerns about the Tata Group, the owner of Air India.

War of words

Air India's response to Akasa's accusations was that government rules mandating a notice period of six to twelve months for pilots were "not currently enforceable."

Wilson also told his counterpart Dube that Akasa itself had "previously engaged in similar actions" by poaching pilots from Tata Group's budget carrier, Air India Express, and other airlines.

"It was a little surprising to us that Akasa now found the practice objectionable," Wilson wrote in the letter, as detailed in the Reuters report.

Akasa did not comment on its communication with Air India but stated that the pilot exit issue was "now behind us," and they are focused on growth. Air India and Akasa's CEOs have not yet publicly commented on the matter.

It is worth noting that Akasa Air's Vinay Dube had earlier made it clear that he is "dead set against" the idea of having any such agreement between airlines.

"Not at all. Absolutely not. I am dead set against it. I think pilots like any other employees should be completely allowed to work with whatever airline they want and I don't believe that the airlines should collude on this topic at all. I don't think there is a need and I don't think it is right," he said.

This dispute occurs as Air India is in the midst of a hiring spree, with its subsidiary, Air India Express, aiming to expand its fleet to 170 aircraft over the next five years. Akasa recently lost approximately 10 per cent of its 450 pilots in a short period, with some joining Air India Express without completing their notice periods.

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