

India seeks global code to curb pilot poaching

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Dhaka: India is calling on the international community to develop a new code of conduct governing the cross-border hiring of airline personnel, citing growing concerns that aggressive recruitment by foreign carriers is disrupting its domestic aviation growth.

In a working paper submitted to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) on August 1, India said that its airlines are facing repeated poaching of experienced pilots and cabin crew by foreign carriers, often without adequate notice. This trend, it argued, is undermining the orderly development of India's civil aviation sector.

The document, published on ICAO's website ahead of its upcoming triennial assembly, highlights the country's challenges as it seeks to build a global aviation hub and expand air connectivity. It has not been previously reported.

"Airlines from other countries tend to recruit experienced pilots, engineers, technicians, and cabin crew from Indian carriers, preventing India's civil aviation sector from achieving planned and orderly growth," the paper said, without naming specific airlines.

According to the submission, this pattern creates a "vicious cycle," where Indian carriers are constantly forced to divert resources away from operational improvements and expansion in order to train replacement staff.

India, one of the fastest-growing aviation markets in the world, is grappling with a shortage of skilled pilots—an issue that threatens Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of turning the country into a global aviation hub. The sector has come under increased scrutiny following a recent fatal Air India crash.

India's Civil Aviation Ministry was not immediately available for comment.

Earlier this year, the government estimated that India would need approximately 30,000 pilots over the next 15 to 20 years, up from the current 6,000–7,000, as domestic carriers hold orders for more than 1,700 new aircraft.

Major Indian airlines like IndiGo and Air India dominate the domestic market, while international carriers—including Emirates, British Airways, and Lufthansa—maintain regular operations to and from India. The issue of pilot poaching has also sparked tensions among local airlines, with Air India and Akasa Air trading accusations in 2023 over recruitment practices.

The working paper stops short of detailing how the proposed global code would function but emphasizes the need for ICAO member states to adopt guiding principles for managing the international movement of aviation professionals.

"These challenges cause economic losses that affect Indian carriers' ability to compete in international markets and meet its ambitious goal of serving 300 million domestic passengers annually by 2030," the paper said.

ICAO, established in 1944 to coordinate international aviation

standards, operates by consensus and sets global norms ranging from air traffic management to safety protocols.

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