

AFRICAN AVIATION PROFESSIONALS ARE STRONGLY MOTIVATED TO DRIVE AVIATION SAFETY



Tom Kok, Director of AviAssist Foundation

In this exclusive interview with Aviation & Allied Business Publications, Safety champion and Director AviAssist Foundation, Tom Kok discusses promotion of safety in the African aviation industry, training and other issues relating to safety in the aviation industry generally.

Q : You recently signed a partnership with Landover Business Aviation School (LABS) / Overland Airways, what is driving this partnership? Please shed more light on the objectives.?

A: The partnership is driven by an ambition to increase AviAssist's impact on aviation safety in West Africa because we have been mostly active in East and Southern Africa. It has been a goal for us to do more in West and Central Africa which needs more than East and Southern Africa, if you look at the statistics. We have been looking for a partner that can help us drive and grow that impact and with Landover we have found one. Through the participation of Overland Airways staff in our courses in East Africa, they became familiar with the work of AviAssist and that's basically where the partnership started. Over the last 5 years we have gradually developed our relationship with Overland Airways and Landover. We recently completed three courses as a first trial to see where we can take the partnership to. Nigeria is a new setting for us and we were looking for a stable partner in the country. .

The plan is develop the cooperation over the next few years and bring safety promotion events to Nigeria on a regular basis with LABS (Landover Aviation Business School). We also plan to expand our work from here into West Africa and Central Africa to make sure that professionals from Ghana, Cameroon and mostly English-speaking countries find their way to Lagos for aviation safety promotion training.

Q: Safety reports emanating from IATA and other sources suggest that African safety position is improving. In your view, what do you think Africa is doing right and which areas do you want to see improvement?

A: I think it is very impressive, given that it is a growing industry on the continent, that we keep the statistics more or less the same. Over the past decades, sometimes African does it very well and even better than global average, but overall, the statistics are more challenging in Africa. But we have to do better to avoid more accidents and incidents as the industry grows. I think what Africa is doing right in the last few years especially since the Abuja safety target in 2012, is that governments have gotten a clearer focus on the importance of aviation safety. But I think we still have a long



way to go. The Abuja targets are very good policy guidelines for governments, Civil Aviation Authorities and big organisations. But for the average person who works in aviation safety, the Abuja targets don't always mean much because they are very strategic. For a grassroots professional, let's say someone who works in the safety department of Valujet or Overland Airways or any Nigerian operator, those targets don't mean that much in their daily work. For example, if you talk about improving runway safety, how are you as a professional supposed to deal with that? I think that's where we have to make a bigger impact. I once jokingly said that the 17th Abuja Target must be to make the Abuja Targets more useful to grassroots safety professionals.

Q: Your training focused on safety leadership and human factors. What is driving these focus areas?

A: I think an increasing realization in the world is that just dealing with technical factors is not enough; we also need to pay attention to the human and organizational factors. So, if we don't make sure that the shareholders of companies have an appreciation of safety, then it will be difficult to make changes. If the push from the shareholders is 'Profit, Profit' and there are not people saying "how about safety", it is not going to work. So that's why we must really pay attention to the human factor as well as organizational factors. The team leadership and aviation course we gave here at the Landover Aviation Business School is specifically meant to address that: how can we get better leaders in general who want to champion safety, not just because it is their job but simply because they strongly believe it is the right thing to do.

Q: AviAssist has been at the forefront of promoting aviation safety. What has been the experience and are you seeing results?

A: African aviation professionals are strongly motivated in their drive to improve aviation safety. It seems to move from just the legal obligation to do something to a situation where people go beyond the legal obligation and just want to make flying safer. Aviation safety seems to increasingly move from just meeting legal obligations to a situation where people say "forget about the legal obligation, about compliance only". Because it has to be safe not just for the visiting tourist or business person, but also for your friends and relatives; it will help Africa grow. The distances in Africa are so big, so we need air transport and we need safe air transport because people deserve it. The world should wake up to the fact that there are thousands of professionals in Africa working very hard every day to make air travel the safest form of transport, also in Africa. For the team at AviAssist, it has been a wonderful experience. We make a small contribution to their work, our role is being a catalyst to speed up safety progress but the real dedication and energy comes and has to come from African professionals



Over the past decades, sometimes African does it very well and even better than global average, but overall, the statistics are more challenging in Africa. But we have to do better to avoid more accidents and incidents as the industry grows.

Q: Besides West Africa, are you looking at building capacity across the continent?

A: Our ambition is, in the next decade, to have three AviAssist safety promotion centers: one in Rwanda, we're now researching the possibilities for another one in West Africa with Landover and Overland. And another one in Southern Africa. The approach which Japan Airlines has taken, with the first safety promotion centre in the world, is very inspirational. They have a safety promotion center in their airline. More recently, both Boeing and Airbus have set up safety promotion centers in their own company abroad. We want to do that in Africa. The purpose of those centers is three fold: the first is to learn, that will be with courses just like we have run with LABS.

The second one is to do research on aviation safety because surprisingly, there is no research being done on African aviation safety. Now we use data from the US or Australian Government, but there is no research done into other specific things that make or break aviation safety in Africa. And the third, and maybe most important one is experience, we want to realise a place where people are actually invited to see, feel and hear about safety, Interactive and experiential learning.

Q: The world seems to be moving towards sustainability, do you worry that with increasing focus on sustainability, it could compete with safety for resources?

A: I think safety is so enshrined in our industry and international standards that I cannot see it change. I think what we also have to do is to look at where they come together, the safety of sustainability. If we get different types of fuel, if we get electrical aircraft in the medium to near future, how do we make sure that the fire and rescue service, for example, can deal with that? In many safety perspectives, it needs a totally different approach. I do think we have an obligation to be much more sustainable, that is something we want to take on board at AviAssist especially on this junction between sustainability and safety because we owe that to future generations. ■