THAILAND ADDS AIRLINE INSPECTORS AS IT BRACES FOR EUROPE OUTCOME

News / Airlines

Thailand is recruiting airline inspectors to address the most pressing issues highlighted in a safety downgrade of its aviation industry by the international watchdog, as it awaits a European assessment due Thursday.

The UN's International Civil Aviation Organization noted more than 1,000 deficiencies when it cut Thailand's aviation safety rating earlier this year, and the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration downgraded the country Dec. 1, preventing Thai carriers from adding new U.S. destinations. Inclusion on the European Commission's air safety list would bar Thai carriers from flying to Europe, a potential blow for the country's tourism-dependent economy.

A European ban also could hit money-losing Thai Airways International Pcl, the only commercial Thai carrier to fly to the continent. The carrier said in an e-mailed statement Wednesday that it "has a situational plan and business continuity plan in place" ahead of the European decision.

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"Thailand always has had a very good safety record," Mark D. Martin, chief executive officer of Dubai-based Martin Consulting LLC, said in an e-mail. "It is more about how one enforces regulations and ensures safety is not compromised, and for that the regulator must be proactive."

Personnel Shortage

About half the points ICAO raised are key issues including the regulatory framework and licensing of pilots and airlines, and Thailand needs qualified personnel to address them, said Montol Suchookorn, a spokesman for the government's new Command Center for Resolving Civil Aviation Issues.

"If we can solve the issues highlighted by ICAO, problems with other agencies will be gone as well," he said.

The European list is drawn up by the E.U. Air Safety Committee, which comprises representatives of all member states plus three non-E.U. countries and the European Aviation Safety Agency. European officials visited Thailand in November to review its aviation regulator, Thai Airways and charter flight operator M Jet, which also flies to the continent, said Preecha Pradabmook, secretary at the command center.

Thailand currently has just 49 of the 86 inspectors it needs to check on its fleet of passenger jets, Preecha told reporters Dec. 4 in Bangkok. The government will train more personnel on specific aircraft and is asking local carriers to provide pilots who can become inspectors, he said.

Growing Industry

Thailand's challenges partly are due to the rapid growth of its airline industry, which has drawn some officials to the private sector in search of higher salaries, Preecha said.

"The government is asking private operators not to steal officials from them," he said.

A day after the FAA's downgrade, Thai Airways President Charamporn Jotikasthira said the company would be more severely affected by similar action in Europe. Its 11 routes to the continent provide a third of the carrier's revenue, he said.

The European Commission last updated its safety list June 25. Indonesia and Nepal were the only Asian countries banned, though four Indonesian carriers were exempted, including flag carrier PT Garuda Indonesia.

"Thai Air is in a better situation than airlines in Indonesia," said Shukor Yusof, founder of Endau Analytics, an aviation consultancy in Malaysia. "They have a better safety record, so it's unlikely they'll be blacklisted."

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