

AVIATION OMBUDSMAN IN SIGHT

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January 2011

Despite attempts by air carriers to avoid appointment of any ombudsman in aviation, following the steep growth in the number of passengers and the issues emanating from the chaos of hike in fares last year, the government has finally firmed up plans for implementation of an ombudsman as a one-stop redressal mechanism and to act as an arbitrator to settle disputes against airlines or airports. At the outset, the quasi-judicial authority is intended to be in Delhi later this year with several aviation ombudsman at State level subsequently.

PSA's view – The government has taken a leap forward in compelling implementation of an ombudsman scheme in this sector wherein currently there is no real mechanism to resolve passenger complaints and the only method is to approach consumer disputer forums which are protracted. However, since this scheme was proposed by Mr. Praful Patel, ex aviation minister, a day prior to the reshuffle in the Cabinet, it is to be seen whether the new aviation minister is keen to process the steps suggested.

DGCA reprieve on deadline to phase-out expat pilots

The Ministry of Civil Aviation has granted much-needed relief to domestic airlines, allowing them to employ expat pilots and keep them on their rolls till 2013, as the aviation industry prepares to induct more aircrafts in three years to meet increasing travel demand. The extension of three years is also a shift from the government's policy of granting yearly extensions, which would help Indian airlines to compete better with other countries carriers. The DGCA had earlier fixed July 2011 as the deadline for domestic airlines to phase out foreign pilots.

PSA view – This is not the first time that DGCA has postponed phase-out deadline for expat pilots. In April 2010, DGCA had agreed to extend the deadline from June 2010 to July 2011. The three years reprieve may help Indian Airlines to compete better with other countries and would not hamper their growth plans as nearly 15% of the total number of pilots in India are foreigners. Moreover, this extension was necessitated because there is an acute shortage of trained Indian pilots as well as capacity additions by the air carriers following a surge in demands in recent months.

ATC Automation to improve safety

In furtherance of its airport modernization plan, the Airports Authority of India ("AAI") has decided to automate air traffic control. As a first step, AAI will implement the automation process for the airport at Ahmedabad. Through the automation process, the system to be installed will automatically pick up

information on aircraft movement and communicate the same to the air traffic controllers. This will reduce the workload of the air traffic controllers and will increase the efficiency of the already congested air traffic.

PSA view – With air traffic congestion getting worse day by day and increasing concerns over safe management of air traffic, automating the entire system is definitely a move in the right direction. The AAI has undertaken an ambitious and novel project for automation of one airport and plans to expand the implementation of this to other airports as well, which will definitely assist passengers and airlines. It is now a question of time as to whether this system will effectively contribute towards efficient management of air traffic and safety.

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