European High Level Task Force on Conflict Zones

Introduction

Since the tragic event of the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the Ukraine, there is a general consensus within the international community that improvements can be made in the way stakeholders share information on risks arising from conflict zones.

As a consequence, in September 2015 the Romanian national authority co-organized with EASA a high level conference in Bucharest to study how to achieve more consistency in the advice offered to airlines and to protect the interest of EU citizens travelling inside and outside Europe.

The participants called for the setting-up of a European High Level Task-Force to respond effectively to risks associated with overflight of zones of conflict or armed insurgency.

Recommendations

There is a clear necessity to take into account, at the European level, the specific problem of the overflight of conflict zones. There is an urgent need to protect civil aviation against many forms of attacks. These attacks can be carried out voluntarily or accidentally, by regular armies or non-governmental forces engaged in combat, involving the use of weapons which can harm civil aviation at cruise altitudes, or during approaches, or while taxing.

While States have the primary responsibility for issuing information, as well as prohibitions and restrictions, concerning overflight in their own Flight Information Region (FIR), it is accepted, after the downing of MH17, that some States will fail to meet their obligation, and it is therefore essential that alternative information mechanisms are available to aviation community.

In the current climate of political unrest in many parts of the world, airlines have expressed a need for a consolidated picture of the safety/security situation. It has been agreed that a level playing field for all airlines is required to protect all passengers. Operators have vastly different resources available to them. However, all operators and passengers should have access to the best available information.

The safety of passengers, and aircraft crews, can be effectively improved if timely and accurate information is made available to all stakeholders. One of main identified areas for improvement at European level is the need for availability, in a timely manner, of information on a common risk picture, to support National Authorities and operators in their own decision making processes.

Measures need to be taken at many levels to limit the risks posed to civil aviation that stem from regional conflicts zones. The consolidated recommendations made in this report offer a way forward at European level. Under the auspices of EASA, and coordinated at the European level, an alerting and information system needs to be further developed. The following actions are therefore recommended:

STATE Actions:

EU Member States are recommended to set up national systems for addressing Risks to Civil Aviation from Conflict Zone in which relevant information is shared with operators. In addition, EU Member States should cooperate in sharing conflict zone information with the view to enable the development of common EU risk assessments (facilitated by DG HOME) and to enable the timely sharing of information on rapidly emerging new threats.

EASA Actions:

EASA should put in place a process allowing the publication of information and recommendations related to conflict zone risks, based on common EU risk assessments, or based on threat information.

This should be done in close coordination with Member States, taking into account the needs for both consultation and for timely dissemination including for emergency cases.

Intelligence Agencies Actions:

Within the boundaries of a States' legal structure, the intelligence agencies should support national systems for addressing risks arising from conflict zones and should support the State's contribution to the sharing of information at EU level on rapidly emerging new threats.

European Commission Actions:

The Commission (DG HOME) should facilitate the exchange of risk analysis and the development of common EU risk assessments, with the support from Member States, DG MOVE, EASA and other EU institutions such as European External Action Service (EEAS).

Operator Actions:

Operators should make use of available information and recommendations on conflict zones, and incorporate this information into their risk assessment or decision making processes. They should furthermore share own risk assessment information with their national authorities, and are encouraged to share this information with the RCZ Network, and EASA.

Other developments: ICAO Response and its Characteristics

At global-level, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) established an international high-level task force, of which one of the main outcomes has been the creation of a common repository. This repository includes aeronautical information circulars (AIC), notices to airmen (NOTAMs) or other similar documents providing advice, recommendations or even prohibiting operators under a States' oversight from overflying certain parts of the world for security reasons, (or authorising overflights only above a certain height). This repository brings the information to the attention of the international aviation community, while allowing the State in charge of the zone affected the right to publish an objection. Discussions show that there are however, some characteristics of the ICAO repository that restrict its utility.

First, the risk assessment itself is *isolated* in nature, namely a particular State's view may not reflect the full scope of the problem. The State's NOTAM is issued based on a national risk assessment, which is based on the State's intelligence capabilities. As a consequence of this dependency, a risk assessment may be either over or under estimated, and not reflect a single representative picture. In addition, there are numerous methodologies used to calculate a risk assessment which can lead States to different conclusions on the same airspace. In situations where a conflict zone spans across multiple States, only one source of information may be existing in the repository, producing an unrepresentative risk picture for the total airspace that is affected. Due to the fact that States are assessing risks in isolation, there is a consequence of multiple State publications being communicated in the ICAO repository, with potentially different operational content, resulting in a confusing safety/security message for the operator.

A second characteristic of the ICAO repository is with respect to the *timeliness of the information*, experience has proven that anywhere from 8-10 days is needed to process conflict zone information submitted by States and make it public. Within this time span the "most current" conflict zone information is effectively unavailable to the larger aviation community.

Together, these aforementioned characteristics have created a need for an alternate information sharing and distribution process taking place at European level.