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Pilots flee SAA tensions for jobs abroad

TMG Digital | 25 October, 2016 13:31



The logo of South African Airways sits on the tailfins of Airbus Group NV A340, left, and A330-200 aircraft parked at O.R. Tambo International airport in Johannesburg on February 24, 2015. Image by: Getty Images

Sixty South African pilots have taken up jobs with foreign airlines over the last 12 months.

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Most of them took up positions with Middle Eastern carriers, according to SAA Pilots Association chairman Captain Jimmy Conroy.

Conroy fears the local airline industry and the country may lose a large number of pilots to international airlines due to surging international demand - a loss of skills and experience which it cannot afford in the long term.

"SAA has a normal attrition rate of 15 – 25 pilots per year. Recent negative publicity together with hostility from certain quarters has caused some pilots at SAA to re-evaluate their career options," he said in a statement.

Pilots have been under the whip from SAA board chairperson Dudu Miyeni since last year, who says salaries paid to the airline's pilots are "exorbitant and unaffordable".

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The international aviation sector is booming, with Bloomberg recently reporting that Chinese airlines need to hire almost 100 pilots a week for the next 20 years to meet skyrocketing travel demand.

Conroy said South African pilot licences were recently recognised by the Chinese aviation authorities, "which further opens the market to experienced South African airline pilots".

Commercial aviation consultancy AirInsight estimates the global supply of commercial airline pilots at 281,000 currently, but projects global demand to grow to 428,988 pilots by 2034. Their report states: "The first impacts of the pilot shortage are being manifest already. The problem is therefore significant."

Air traffic across China is set to almost quadruple over the next 20 years, making it the fastest growing market, according to Airbus Group SE. The Chinese air transport fleet has more than tripled in a decade to 2,650 according to the Civil Aviation Industry Statistics Report. As a result, some of these carriers are paying about 50% more than what some senior captains earn in the United States.

This means that pilots in emerging markets such as South Africa could quadruple their salaries.

Conroy said that although there are aviation colleges who train pilots, few pilots are sponsored by airlines in South Africa, with none currently sponsored by SAA.

"According to 20-year industry projections, it is clear that the shrinking pool of experienced or future pilots, is going to heat up competition among global carriers for the best and most proficient pilots. SAA, in this scenario, can ill afford to lose any pilots."

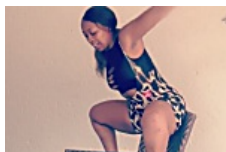
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