

**Seventy-third Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia
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**Statement from the International Civil Aviation (ICAO) Asia and Pacific Regional Office
Agenda Item 8.2 - Annual report on monitoring progress on UHC and health-related SDGs**

First of all, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Asia and Pacific Office wishes to take this opportunity to applaud WHO South-East Asia Regional Office for the leadership and resolve in remaining committed to the objective of WHO by conducting the current session despite the wide-ranging complications and challenges encountered in the current pandemic. ICAO is also thankful to the WHO South East Asia Regional Office to provide an opportunity to present this Statement.

In connection with the unprecedented global public health crisis which has hampered global air travel, ICAO is duty-bound to highlight several key points for the attention of this high-level WHO Regional Committee, especially in regard air travel closure across the borders. Needless to emphasize that air transport provides a vital link for global socio-economic sustenance and constitutes an essential lifeline that connects people, communities and businesses across States and Continents.

ICAO, as the UN specialized agency fosters the planning and development of international air transport which facilitates more than 100,000 daily flights in aviation's global network to operate safely and reliably under ordinary circumstances. This number of daily flights has been drastically reduced to a couple of thousands only as of today, limited mainly to repatriation, cargo and domestic flights. Pre COVID-19 data and statistics revealed that the global aviation sector has a total economic impact of USD 2.7 trillion representing 3.6% of the world's GDP, and supports a total of 65.5 million jobs globally, but these figures have become invalid now.

According to International Monetary Fund and World Bank assessments the global economy will undergo a projected -4.9% to -5.2% contraction in World Gross Domestic Product in 2020 alone which causes a serious threat to the global socio-economic stability. It is therefore evident that the COVID-19 pandemic presents implications far beyond a health crisis. ICAO remains cognizant of the complexities around this multidimensional crisis and continues to work on various fronts to ensure that its 193 Member States meet their air transport needs during the crisis and as they struggle to embark on a recovery path.

Like other sectors of economy, the impact of the crisis on aviation is staggering and unprecedented. The 31,500 plus world aircraft fleet is virtually grounded. More and more of the 1,300 scheduled Airlines are vulnerable to shut down, appealing for financial bail-outs. 3,750 plus world airports are literally empty. To reinstate these essential components of the aviation system will be a daunting and unprecedented challenge and a deepening crisis itself, even for the developed economies of the world. ICAO estimates an overall reduction of air passengers (both international and domestic) ranging from 54% to 60% in 2020 compared to 2019 which will be USD 355 to 392 billion potential loss of gross passenger operating revenues of airlines. There will be an estimated loss of over 50% of passenger traffic and 57% or over USD 97 billion airport revenues in 2020 compared to business as usual as estimated by Airports Council International.

Since the beginning of the crisis, ICAO has been collaborating with the UN system and other stakeholders to support States in addressing the challenges and impacts of COVID-19 within the context of civil aviation through various action plans and recovery mechanisms. To this end, ICAO Council has established the Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART) whose mandate is to help and support the aviation industry by identifying and recommending strategic priorities and policies to cope and recover from the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

CART observes through its report released in June 2020, that the aviation restart and recovery is best supported by an international approach where globally and regionally harmonized, mutually accepted measures are essential. CART has developed 11 recommendations spelling out such measures which are compatible with safety and security requirements, proportionate to the improvement of public health and flexible where possible to allow for a viable economic recovery.

CART further issued a guidance document with a framework for addressing the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on the global aviation transportation system which includes mitigation measures needed to reduce public health risk to air passengers and aviation workers while strengthening confidence among the travelling public, and governments to restart air travel for both domestic and international sectors.

On 6 March 2020, WHO and ICAO published a joint statement providing updated advice regarding COVID-19 and International Civil Aviation, which reaffirms their commitment as UN specialized agencies to foster greater international cooperation to contain the virus and to protect the health of travellers. The statement also stressed the importance of greater public-private cooperation and inter-agency dialogue and also reminded the government aviation and health officials to enhance cross-sector collaboration at the national level and establish National Facilitation Committees as required by ICAO Standards.

While concurring that the first and foremost obligation of WHO at this critical juncture is to combat and control the current pandemic, WHO's partnership with ICAO and its support to explore ways and means to formulate the necessary platform to address the restart of air travel across the borders is well acknowledged. Given the importance of considering detailed health and disease information alongside civil aviation policies and procedures surrounding COVID-19, both ICAO and WHO have worked closely together in order to develop the CART Guidance and ensure coordinated global action.

Participating at an ICAO meeting focused on 'Harmonized Implementation of CART Take-off Guidance for air travel through COVID-19' on 16 July 2020, Dr. Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director, Regional Office for South-East Asia mentioned in her opening remarks that "Critical to the successful roll-out of the Guidance, and the recovery of international traffic and trade, will be close collaboration between State Aviation and Public Health Authorities. As the Guidance outlines, risk mitigation recommendations and measures are not intended to be static, but rather adjusted as per epidemiological evidence". Dr. Singh noted that rigorous and ongoing monitoring by aviation and public health officials is essential to ensuring such adjustments can be made in policy and in practice, which WHO is fully committed to facilitate. Dr. Singh affirmed that the 'Take-off Guidance' issued by the Council Aviation Recovery Task Force, of which WHO is a member, is a valuable resource and all opportunities should be leveraged to raise awareness and uptake.

Where consensus of both WHO and ICAO has converged to promote closer collaboration between national aviation and public health authorities in the combat of the current pandemic and working together to promote restart of aviation through harmonized implementation of guidance issued by ICAO, the consensus of this august gathering is invited for the establishment of a regional and national mechanism for closer collaboration and dialogue between national public health and aviation authorities for the restart of cross-border commercial air transport operations. In this context, risk assessment of individual States through structured communications between aviation and public health authorities is paramount to achieve the intent in a realistic manner.

ICAO stands committed to provide all necessary support to its member States to recover from the aftermath of the pandemic and restore normal air transport operations.