THE SUNDAY TIMES
Sunday, July 14, 2019

Post-Easter bombings' restrictions clip private aviators' wings

By Asiri Fernando

Private helicopter operators are affected by impractical security restrictions in the wake of the Easter Sunday bombings, with flying hours down almost 70 percent last month, a group of aviators told the Sunday Times.

The claims come against the backdrop of Government efforts to ensure tourists that Sri Lanka is safe and open for business. The operators are now seeking a meeting with aviation regulators and security establishments to discuss the issue. Sri Lanka has six private helicopter operators at present.

The operators pointed out that although some of the restrictions imposed after the Easter Sunday bombings had been lifted, the industry was still hit by significant restrictions that had not been lifted. They noted that the tourist arrivals were picking up, but they were unable to fly clients to some destinations due to these restrictions.

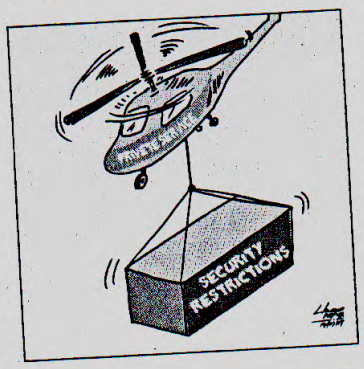
The Sunday Times has seen a June 20 dated e-mail sent to aviation operators by the Civil Aviation Authority Director General H.M.C. Nimalsiri. It said:

"I wish to inform all the domestic Private operators, Flying Schools and Leisure operators that the temporary restrictions imposed on the operation of domestic civil flights following the 21st April Easter Sunday disaster, have been removed and the freedom of flying have been restored (as of the situation that prevailed before 21st April 2019) with immediate effect."

However, the operators claimed this was incorrect. Attempts to reach Mr Nimalsiri for comments failed.

One complaint is that post-Easter bombings regulations require that Police Constables be present to check passengers at each pick-up point outside aerodromes. The presence of a woman PCs is required, if female passengers are to be checked. The operators say many of the police stations are reluctant to send PCs. "They often complain they can't travel to far off locations, and ask us to provide transport to the landing zone and back," one aviator claimed.

They complained that, however, tourists, who travel via land, are not subjected to such body and baggage checks, prior to boarding their coaches. "If we fly clients to a hotel and have to stay overnight, we have to submit police-approved paper work from that site, to the Civil Aviation Authority and the Air Force. Sometimes the pilots have to visit police stations to get an OIC's signature on the documents," one aviator claimed.



"Why can't the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF), the CAA or the Ministry of Defence do a threat assessment and streamline these processes?" he asked.

They pointed out that high spending tourists who hire helicopters for sightseeing or to hop from one location to another, do so to save time. "If a tourist wants to fly to Kandy, from a hotel in Yala, and the nearest police station claims it's too far for them to send a PC and WPC to perform their duties, we can't fly those tourists, and they are perplexed as to what's going on," he explained. The aviators point out that an hour's sightseeing or flying between two locations brings in around US$ 1,500 to Sri Lanka's economy.

Furthermore, the Sunday Times learns that Sri Lanka's only privately owned and regulator authorised heliport in Welisara is now unused, as security regulations compel them to park their helicopters at Ratmalana Airport. However, security aside, the operators are being charged almost Rs 600,000 a month, by the Airport &Aviation Services Ltd.

A senior Air Force officer said a security audit had been done on the Welisara Heliport after the bombings, but the CAA was slow to respond to the findings.

The Welisara Heliport, built at a cost of over Rs 200 million, is owned by IWS Holdings Pvt Ltd. The management of IWS Aviation was not reachable for comment.

"The Government is calling for tourism promotion but, at the same time, asking operators to pay to park their aircraft on a State airfield, after having dislodged them from a purpose built and authorised heliport. This is not helping the tourism sector to recover," a helicopter pilot said.

The aviators also point out that, the lack of landing zones in the heart of the Colombo's Central Business District (CBD) makes it difficult for them to pick up passengers from major hotels along Galle Road. There is a 'No-Fly' Zone over Colombo's CBD. Landing Zones for private helicopters and approach paths to it are not viable at present, given the presence of a High Security Zone, several key foreign diplomatic missions and key Government offices, the SLAF said in reply to a query by the Sunday Times.

The balance between practical security, deregulation and streamlining of clearance processes, is the need of the hour, for the growth of the general aviation and tourism industry.