AFTER MH17: MANAGING THE NETWORK AT A TIME OF CRISIS

Last month EUROCONTROL’s Director General Frank Brenner informed the European Parliament that expanded safety and risk information is now available at all hours to aviation professionals.

In his intervention at the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE), on 24 March, Frank Brenner, outlined EUROCONTROL’s experience in dealing with safety situations in the air and the current state of play on conflict zones, especially after the recent ICAO High Level Safety Conference.

He explained that EUROCONTROL, the European Organisation for Safety in Air Navigation has a pan-European scope as an intergovernmental organisation with forty-one Member States, ensuring a uniform approach to safety in Air Traffic Management as aircraft move across the airspace of its Member States.

As the Network Manager (NM) nominated by the European Commission in 2011, EUROCONTROL covers the airspace of all forty-one of its Member States, not just the EU twenty-eight, and works closely with neighbouring States to exchange flight plans, updates and position data of airborne civil and military aircraft.

To meet its performance target of en route delays of on average no more than thirty seconds a flight, the NM co-ordinates intensively with civil and military airspace users, employing to the full the flexible airspace procedures designated by EUROCONTROL, and legislated by the EU. In 2015, following events in the Crimea and the east of Ukraine, traffic patterns have had to change significantly, but this has been managed successfully. Managing the network at a time of crisis or disruption is one of the most important elements of the NM role and one reason why EUROCONTROL has been so actively involved in aviation’s response to MH17.

Mr Brenner explained that the responsibility for closing airspace or routes lies with the relevant sovereign nation. In the case of Ukraine, the State took the decision to declare the airspace open where MH17 was lost in the form of a Notice to Airmen, or NOTAM, showing what airspace is available or which airports or routes at various altitudes are closed. Such information is made available to all airspace users via EUROCONTROL’s European AIS Data Base (EAD). Airlines decide on the route to fly, taking into consideration various criteria such as safety, time in the air, fuel burn, emissions, charges weather, capacity constraints, and arrival time. Airlines may decide to avoid airspace
even if the airspace is declared open by the respective State responsible for that airspace.

EUROCONTROL believes that countries need to start sharing their risk assessments that lead to opening or closing airspace. States are obliged under ICAO to conduct such risk assessments but they are not obliged to share them. However, the recent ICAO Safety Conference encouraged States to share this information as this was also the recommendation of the ICAO group on conflict zones, in which EUROCONTROL participated recently. Any nation that has conflict within its borders already needs to produce a risk assessment under current ICAO rules as part of its process for deciding whether or not it is safe to keep open the airspace above that area of conflict.

Sharing these assessments will mean that other countries will also have the information they need. EUROCONTROL is encouraging States to share their risk assessments, and makes them available around the clock in real-time to States and airspace users.

This information is made available at all hours in a portal restricted to aviation professionals on EUROCONTROL’s Network Operations Portal (NOP), where users can find all NOTAMs closing airspace, NOTAMs from countries prohibiting or advising their airlines to avoid certain areas, relevant advice from ICAO and risk assessments.

**Picture caption**

*EUROCONTROL, the European organisation for safety in air navigation, has a pan-European scope as an intergovernmental organisation with 41 Member States, ensuring a uniform approach to safety in air traffic management as aircraft move across the airspace of its Member States.*