

## **Opinion**

# **Security issues posed by ground handling**

Sanat Kaul | Updated On: Nov 28, 2018

**In order to ensure safe and efficient practices, labour practices at airports need to be transparent**

In a major security lapse, YSR Congress party chief YS Jagan Mohan Reddy was stabbed by a man inside the Visakhapatnam airport's VIP lounge in October. According to data tabled in the Parliament on August 8, 27 security lapses were reported to Bureau of Civil Aviation over the last three years. Needless to say, the need for well-fortified airports arises from lessons learnt over the years from within the country and abroad.

The Ministries of Civil Aviation and Home Affairs dread a security lapse similar to 9/11 which occurred despite the International Civil Aviation Organisation's (ICAO) warning on poor security in the US domestic aviation sector.

The hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu and landing in Amritsar on the last day of the millennium was our country's last major aviation security lapse. Since then security has been beefed up worldwide, including India. Security levels in airports have improved since Central Industrial Security Force replaced State Police.

However, instances of smuggling of currencies and gold at major airports are being consistently reported. Some of these cases involving airport staff as accomplices signal the need to ensure security compliance among sub-units functioning at airports. One of the major activities that has a bearing on aviation security is Ground Handling (GH), as it involves a large number of workers both skilled and unskilled to enter airport and aircraft for cleaning, cargo and baggage handling and similar functions.

Airlines want ground handling activity to be done very quickly and cheaply for better turnaround. According to sources, an investment of \$6-7 million is needed at each airport for GH quality equipment.

Quick and quality ground handling is important for not just airlines and airports due to efficiency and passenger comfort considerations, but also for the government and the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) from a safety and security perspective.

Global aviation bodies such as ICAO, IATA and Airports Council International are working on model guidelines on Ground Handling as they feel that it is a complex web of activities which needs strong safety and security oversight.

According to them, GH activities need a proper legal framework with licensing and certification along with a safety management system with responsibility and liability allocated to airport operator, aircraft operator and GH service provider.

The National Civil Aviation Policy 2016 has correctly stated that ‘each airport will ensure that there will be three Ground Handling Agencies’ and has said it will include one of Air India or its subsidiary/ joint venture (till it remains a public sector entity), one of the airport operator and one more to be selected by the airport operator in major airports having more than 1.5 million passengers per annum. All these operators will come under Airport Economic Regulation Authority (AERA) to ensure fair pricing.

## **Self-handling**

However, it has also allowed all domestic schedule airlines to do self-handling at all airports provided they do not use contract labour, which is the current practice. This policy has been extended recently to foreign airlines. Contract labour is a security hazard as each worker has to be security cleared by BCAS. Multiple agencies working inside a sterile environment like the airport is riddled with associated risks. Usage of non-qualified and uncertified agencies lead to unfair labour practices, often resulting in higher staff turnover which poses security challenges.

This issue of hiring non-bonafide contract labour for ground handling has been a major source of friction between airlines and the Ministry. A MoCA notification in

December 2017 had given a lead time of eight months to airlines to dispense with non-certified labour contractors in ground handling services.

However, as per the latest notification by Airports Authority of India, the deadline has again been extended till June 30, 2019. With delay in implementation of the policy, security is being compromised on a daily basis.

Acting under pressure of airlines for self-handling, now extended to foreign airlines also, increases Indian aviation's security vulnerability. There is a need for the Ministry of Civil Aviation to review its policy towards self-handling as this practice is not available in most countries, especially the recent extension to foreign airlines. Will it take another disaster for us to learn that security is paramount?

*The writer is former Joint Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation*

**Published on November 28, 2018**