

Air Traffic and Navigation Services Company Limited

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For Immediate Release
Sunday, 25th March 2012

LASER BEAM ATTACKS – CAUSE FOR GRAVE CONCERN

Laser interference is a potential hazard to aircraft safety. From 1st January 2010 until 29th February 2012, there have been a hundred and eighty-one (181) reported incidents of this nature - at some of our major airports in South Africa.

Cape Town International Airport has had the highest number of reported events, with a hundred and six (106 or 58,56%) incidents, followed by Lanseria Airport at twenty-one (21 or 11.06%) incidents. OR Tambo International and East London Airports are joint third with fourteen (14 or 7.73%) reported incidents each.

Notable incidents generally involve people directing powerful laser beams at aircraft on final approach. Other low-flying aircraft such as police and ambulance or rescue helicopters are also targeted at times. There have also been incidents, where such lasers were directed at air traffic control towers. The fact that these lasers can startle the crew during the critical phase of flight (at the time when everyone has to be buckled in, all electronic devices off, and the cabin lights dimmed to allow for better visibility outside) makes these events serious. In the event that a pilot loses control of the aircraft momentarily due to being blinded by these lights, this could lead to a serious aircraft accident.

To date there have been no prosecutions. However, in the period under review, there have been two notable arrests. The first was during the Soccer World Cup in 2010 - at a Fan Park in Durban, KwaZulu Natal. Currently, there's a pending case in the Bloemfontein Courts. Two people were arrested during the ANC Centenary celebrations - for shining lasers at aircraft.

An Aviation Security Committee comprising of the Air Traffic and Navigation Services (ATNS) Company of South Africa, the South African Civil Aviation Authority, Airport Company South Africa, South African Air Force and the South African Police Service is working on identifying possible mitigation actions – which will include raising awareness, to address these concerns. Additionally, legislative considerations (gaps) are being looked into, where punitive measures and/or sanctions are to be reviewed and strengthened.

Last year (October 2011), a Seminar on Laser Interference in Aviation, hosted by Eurocontrol, was held in Belgium, Brussels. Various aviation organizations, such as the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Air Traffic Controllers, State Aviation Authorities, Airline Operators and Associations, Pilot Associations, Airport Authorities and Security Managers, Law Enforcement Agencies, Legal Experts, Laser Specialists and Manufacturers, and Medical Experts attended.

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The objective of the seminar was to bring all stakeholder groups with a vested interest in this issue, to consider adopting a collective approach to reducing the growing threat of unauthorized laser interference in aviation. The seminar also looked into: raising awareness; quantifying the degree of laser interference in aviation; exchanging knowledge; concerns and best practices in dealing with the issue and considering how communities can identify possible mitigation actions on both national and international levels.

Current applicable legislation requires that all owners of laser devices to have a permit for such. Lately, a disturbing phenomenon has reared its ugly head in South Africa. Illegal laser pointers are imported without permits and are sold on the black/grey markets such as Trinket stores or Flea markets.

The community-at-large is henceforth urged not to buy these devices and to report the selling thereof to the police.

Ends,

(Words: 659)

About ATNS

Air Traffic and Navigation Services (ATNS) Company of South Africa is the sole provider of air traffic, navigation, training and associated services within South Africa and some parts of Africa. Responsible for 10% of the world's airspace, ATNS proudly manages more than half-a-million arrival and departure movements every year while maintaining ISO 9001: 2000 accreditation.

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Company Registration No. 1993/004150/06



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