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Pilot shortage throttling aviation growth in China

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By Tim Johnson | McClatchy Newspapers

BEIJING — A pilot shortage is throttling the dramatic and safe ascent of China's aviation industry, leaving hundreds of new Boeing and Airbus jetliners on order without pilots to fly them.

China will need an average of 2,500 pilots each year for the next two decades to fill cockpits, but it can't meet the demand.

So for the first time, foreign pilots are taking command of some Chinese airliners. Citing the pilot shortage as one factor, Aviation Minister Yang Yuanyuan recently declared that the industry is growing "too fast." He's cut back daily flights, slowed the launches of start-up airlines and warned that safety must prevail over growth.

China isn't the only country with a pilot shortage. Airlines across East Asia — and around the world — are grounding flights and offering special pay packages to poach aviators from as far away as Brazil, Russia and Indonesia.

"It's something that is sneaking up on the industry overall because there have always been pilots in the wings," said William R. Voss, chief executive of the Flight Safety Foundation in Alexandria, Va.

Chinese aviation regulators say the nation will need an additional 9,000 or more pilots by 2010, as national airlines add jetliners at the rate of up to 150 a year.

"But speaking truthfully, we only have the capacity to train about 7,000, leaving us short 2,000 pilots," said Gao Hongfeng, the deputy head of the General Administration of Civil Aviation of China. "The shortage of pilots has become an important factor constraining civil aviation's development."

At an Airbus flight center near Beijing Capital Airport, two huge cockpit simulators rest on hydraulic legs, looking like electronic spiders, gently swaying as pilots inside conduct mock flights. With demand soaring, the simulators are in action "20 hours a day," said Pierre Steffen, vice president of customer services for Airbus China Ltd.

"We've had two occasions with two Chinese airlines where sales deals were accompanied by requests for foreign pilots," Steffen said.

China's Big Three airlines — Air China, China Eastern and China Southern — are working hard to deal with the pilot shortage.

Air China has reserved land to build a training center in Beijing that's likely to be the biggest in the world, with 30 full flight simulators, according to news reports.

Pilot shortages already are affecting airline operations in China and in other East Asian nations, causing a rising number of last-minute flight cancellations, particularly by Hong Kong's Dragonair, but also among Indonesian carriers. The Indonesian airlines have faced mass desertion by pilots flocking to Middle Eastern carriers, which offer higher salaries and bonuses.

"It's problematic now, and it's looking to be an even more serious issue moving forward," said Richard Pinkham, a Singapore-based analyst at the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, an Australian consultancy. "As (China's) 'Big Three' and the rest of the larger regional carriers add aircraft, it will become a serious issue with a possible situation in which there could be more aircraft than pilots to fly them."

Most domestic airlines fly full planes, the result of passenger counts rising at an average annual rate of 16 percent since 2000. Beijing's airport is now the world's ninth busiest in terms of passenger traffic, climbing from No. 42 seven years ago. Sixty of China's 147 airports operate at capacity.

Nearly 20 start-up airlines wait for approval to operate, and a green light may not come soon. One reason: The start-ups don't have pilots.



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"Where do they get their pilots? They can only get them from existing local airlines," Steffen said.

To prevent such raids, some Chinese airlines are putting yokes on their pilots. China Southern this year began charging 100 or so pilot recruits the equivalent of \$88,100 for their training unless they stay with the airline for a set period of time.

China Southern also sends some pilots abroad for training, namely to a flight training school it operates near Perth in western Australia.

While many Chinese pilots are limited in the international job market by a poor command of English, pilots for airlines in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia are abandoning the posts for bigger airlines elsewhere around the globe.

"There's such a demand for pilots that they do have the opportunity to look at their options," said Marsha Bell, the vice president of marketing for Alteon Training, the commercial flight-training arm of Boeing.

In response to pilot shortages, Alteon is offering a condensed jetliner flight course that can train pilots in half the time, as short as 12 to 18 months, without students ever flying small aircraft, such as Cessnas, first. Students spend more time in simulators than in cockpits. The company is moving a simulator-equipped flight center from Kunming in southern China to Shanghai.

The industry is trying to see how it can function more efficiently and effectively, according to Bell. "Simulators are not plagued like airplanes are by weather issues, airspace limitations and hours of operation."

Whether such condensed training can produce pilots that airlines consider sufficiently skilled remains to be seen, and it's something Alteon and China both say they are monitoring closely.

China's newfound go-slow approach to growth also is aimed at protecting its hard-earned reputation for safety in commercial aviation.

"If you were to look at safety statistics worldwide, you'd see China would almost be at the top of the list," said Barry Grindrod, chief executive of Orient Aviation Magazine in Hong Kong.

China hasn't had a fatal crash in more than three years, a sharp departure from the last decade. Between 1992 and 1994, China had nine fatal accidents.

Voss, the flight safety advocate, said he worries that global shortages of trained pilots and airline mechanics could lead to safety problems if pilots are promoted too quickly or airlines cut corners to cope.

Yang, the Chinese minister, appears determined to prevent that in China, saying that ignoring warning signs "may produce high risks in flight safety."

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Experienced Pilots are the one thing the Chinese cannot manufacture. Wise decision by minister Yang to see the importance of this and reign in the industry until qualified Pilots can be placed in every cockpit. It is common practice in Asia (amongst other places) to place 250 hour

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first officers in the cockpit of wide body jets, they complete their training and are sharp kids, but they have zero practical experience. Without a highly competent Captain keeping an eye on them, things can go bad in a hurry. In addition, the ATC system in china is a bit lacking, all the more reason to have experienced Pilots in the seat.

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