

PIA barred from operating out of three UK airports

RAWALPINDI: A day after the UK Civil Aviation Authority, much like its counterpart organisation from the European Union, withdrew the permit of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to operate from three of its airports due to suspicions over the authenticity of pilots' licences, the aviation authorities of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Wednesday sought confirmation of the credentials of Pakistani flight operations officers and engineers working in the Gulf country.

Soon after the European Union Air Safety Agency announced on Tuesday its decision to suspend in principle the PIA's authorisation to operate flights to and from its airports for six months, the British authorities said they too were withdrawing PIA's permit to operate from the Birmingham, London Heathrow and Manchester airports, according to Reuters.

"PIA flights from Birmingham, London Heathrow and Manchester airports are suspended with immediate effect," a spokesman for the UK authority told the news agency late on Tuesday. The three airports are major flying destinations for the airline.

UAE seeks details about credentials of pilots, engineers

The EU and UK authorities took the step of curbing PIA operations in their jurisdictions in the wake of federal Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan's statement last month on the floor of the National Assembly that 150 pilots of the national flag carrier had "dubious licences".

The authorities then proceeded to ground hundreds of pilots, including those working for PIA, on suspicion that they allegedly falsified their examinations to qualify for flying aircraft, leading to them having licences the minister termed "dubious".

Obviously worried that some of the pilots and engineers working in his country might be possessing similar "dubious" credentials, the director general of United Arab Emirates' General Civil Aviation Authority, Saif Mohammad Al Suwaidi, sent a letter to the director general of Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA), Hassan Nasir Jamy, in which he sought verification of the credentials of aircraft maintenance engineers and flight operations officers who originally possessed licences issued by the PCAA.

The letter also contained the list of Pakistani flight operation officers and aircraft maintenance engineers working in the UAE.

"We would like to request your good offices to verify the licensing credentials of the attached pilots list who are currently holding UAE's pilots licences based on licences and qualifications issued by Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority," the letter said.

It further requested the Pakistani officials to clarify the difference between “fake” and “suspect” cases, if any, so that appropriate action could be taken in the interest of safety of flight operations.

“We would highly appreciate if a confirmation is also provided, if there were any such compromise to the integrity of Aircraft Maintenance Engineer and flight operations officer systems,” the letter added.

Meanwhile, officials of the Pakistan High Commission in Ottawa, Canada, have asked the Foreign Office in Islamabad to provide to them facts and figures about the episode. They sought clarifications in order to better prepare themselves in case they were called upon to brief the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) on the matter.

While citing news about “Pakistan’s civil aviation scandal” published in some reputable foreign publications, the officials of the high commission approached the director-general of PCAA, the aviation division’s secretary and other senior officials to seek clarifications on the key issue.

The high commission staff is concerned that sooner or later the matter would be taken up by the ICAO, which is based in Montreal, Canada.

When contacted, however, Foreign Officer spokesperson Aisha Farooqui said: “The Aviation Division is the best place to respond to this.”

The aviation division’s spokesman didn’t respond to requests for comments on the issue.