

REALITY Check

In the last couple of months I have had the pleasure of having some frank conversations about how the Foundation can make a difference.

Everybody agrees on one thing: Making a difference today is less about invention than it is about implementation. Based on accident rates in areas such as Europe and North America, it is pretty clear that we know how to run a remarkably safe system. Yet, in some other parts of the world, the accident rate is comparatively bleak and shows few signs of improvement. It isn't necessarily because safety professionals in those regions don't know how to do their jobs. Often, it is because these people are *not allowed* to do their jobs.

Let me give you a real example. I have worked with a courageous, talented and outspoken woman, Maimuna Taal. Ms. Taal was the director general of civil aviation (DGCA) of the Republic of The Gambia. She did a great job improving safety oversight with little more to work with than her considerable force of will. She was also a leader among her peers. When someone from another developing country would claim they couldn't do anything because of lack of resources, she would remind them forcefully that it didn't cost anything to tell a dangerous operator, "No!"

One day, Taal was confronted with a dangerous operator who was flying two dilapidated Boeing 747s that had just been "reflagged" under questionable circumstances in Sierra Leone. The operator was applying to fly Haj pilgrims out of Gambia. True to form, she said no. Subsequently, this same operator was turned down by the DGCA of Nigeria, and finally by the DGCA of Saudi Arabia.

That was good news for safety, but it worked out badly for Taal; this operator had lots of money

and connections. A few days later, the president of Gambia had Taal thrown in prison on a series of hastily concocted charges.

Back-door communication with the international press prompted some to come to her defense, providing the visibility that she thinks may have saved her life. Eventually, she was released from prison, but she remained in Gambia until she could clear her name. Late this May, after two years of continuations and dozens of court appearances, she finally was acquitted of all charges.

This sort of thing happens all the time. The only thing that makes this story unusual is that Taal fought back. I used an example from Africa, but I could have just as easily used examples from Asia, Eastern Europe or elsewhere. Sitting comfortably in the developed world it is easy for us to ignore the circumstances of a DGCA's sudden departure. Too often we reassure ourselves by sending their replacement a congratulatory letter and new set of training materials. Then we congratulate ourselves for contributing to safety in the developing world.

Those of us who are in a position to help must realize that it doesn't work if we focus only on the easy technical and training issues, leaving the really tough political problems for people like Taal to handle alone. Things have to change, and that process starts with somebody telling the truth, even if it isn't pretty.



*William R. Voss
President and CEO
Flight Safety Foundation*

