

Price of an air ticket has nothing to do with safety: Experts



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EVERY major air incident involving a low-cost carrier invariably raises the question: Are budget airlines unsafe because they cut corners to offer cheap fares?

The same is being asked in the aftermath of the Dec 28 crash of Indonesia AirAsia Flight QZ8501, which was carrying 162 people from Surabaya to Singapore when it plunged into the Java Sea.

Even as rough weather has been flagged as the likely cause of the tragedy, Indonesia's Transport Minister Ignasius Jonan is

pushing for a new rule he believes will ensure that budget carriers have sufficient funds for safety-related costs.

The plan is to set the lowest possible fare for such carriers at 40 per cent of the highest fare.

The minister has not said so explicitly, but it is clear the move is driven by the assumption that budget carriers are able to sell cheap tickets because they stint on everything else, including critical areas like pilot training and aircraft maintenance.

The assumption is flawed and baseless, experts said.

Safety has less to do with whether it is a budget or full-service carrier, and more with how committed an airline is to safety, the quality of people maintaining the planes and the commitment of local regulators towards ensuring that the standards set are met.

Four of the worst air disasters last year all involved full-service airlines.

There was the disappearance of a Malaysia Airlines flight which presumably crashed into the Indian Ocean, the shooting down of another Malaysia Airlines jet as it crossed eastern Ukraine, the crash of Taiwan's TransAsia Airways plane in torrential rain and the crash of an Air Algerie aircraft.

A spokesman for ST Aerospace, a leading global aircraft maintenance and repair firm, said: "In the strictly regulated aviation industry, where safety is of paramount importance, there is a structured framework set by the airworthiness regulators and aircraft manufacturers which all aircraft operators, including low-cost carriers, have to comply with."

Aircraft maintenance and re-

pair companies like ST Aerospace are also required to maintain full compliance with all regulatory requirements, she said.

"Our experience with our customers thus far is that there is certainly no compromise when it comes to safety and quality, be it a low-cost carrier or a full-service airline."

How often an aircraft needs to be checked, what parts need replacement and when, are all stipulated by the plane makers.

The harder a plane is worked, the more frequent the checks. This, in fact, means that low-cost carriers, which typically work their planes harder than full-service airlines, end up having their planes in the hangars more frequently.

Associate Professor Terence Fan of the Singapore Management University, who specialises in

transport, said: "The country of registration of the airline is ultimately responsible for enforcing safety regulations. Some countries are noted to do better on this than others. Many Indonesian carriers, for instance, had until recently been banned from flying to the European Union because of safety concerns."

Garuda Indonesia and Indonesia AirAsia are among a handful of Indonesian carriers that are not blacklisted.

In Singapore, the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore does regular checks and audits to ensure that local carriers, whether budget or full-service, maintain the highest standards of safety, observers said.

Jetstar Asia, for example, has received certification from the International Air Transport Association, which manages an Opera-

tional Safety Audit scheme.

Airlines must meet more than 900 standards in eight operational areas before they can get on the list.

If the Indonesian authorities are serious about boosting air safety, mandating that ticket prices cannot be too low is not the way, experts said.

"If the intention is to tighten maintenance regulations or pilot training, for example – two most common causes of aircraft accidents – they (the authorities) can do so directly," said Prof Fan.

Telling airlines that they cannot sell cheap tickets may prevent excessive price competition but is no guarantee that safety will be boosted, he stressed.

"Such regulations are also difficult to implement and enforce," Prof Fan said.

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