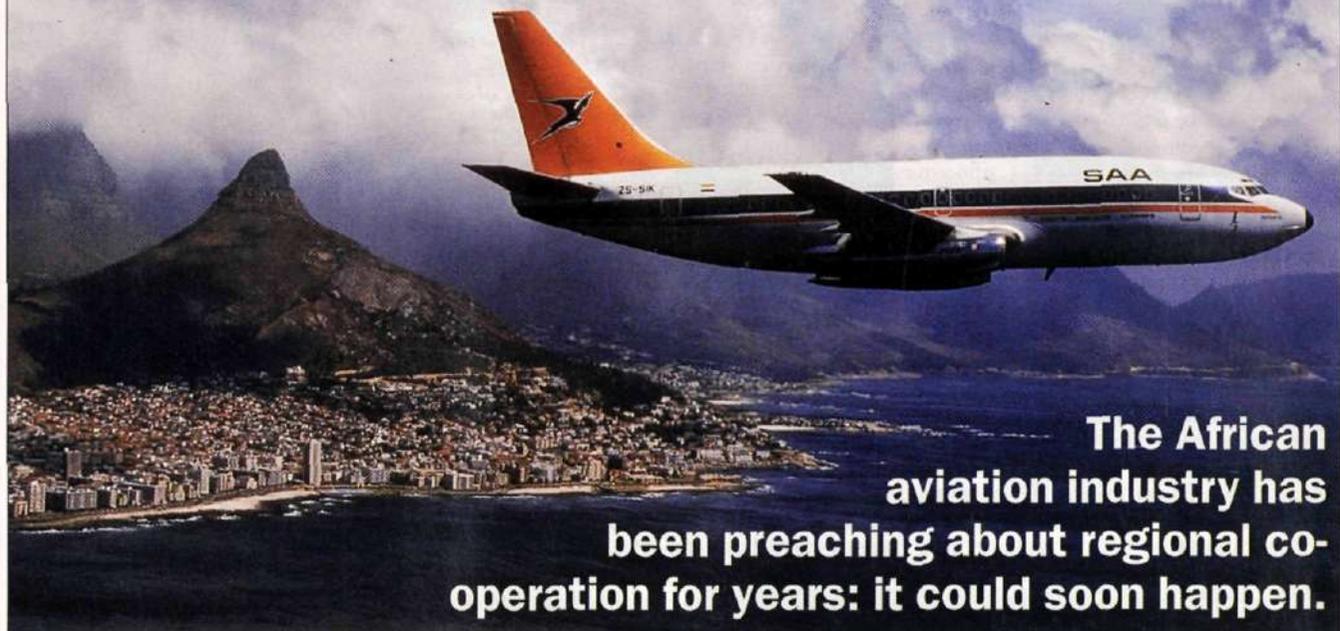


# African aviation



The African aviation industry has been preaching about regional co-operation for years: it could soon happen.

KEVIN O'TOOLE/JOHANNESBURG

**I**N THE middle of August the African aviation community met in Johannesburg to discuss its future. There was nothing new about the issues. The industry, like much else within the African economy, is too small and fragmented for most of its players to do more than survive. Some have not even managed that.

The conclusion, too, was painfully familiar. African aviation desperately needs to disentangle itself from national politics and get down to some solid regional co-operation.

In all of this, the Johannesburg meeting — held under auspices of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) — contained little new.

As long ago as 1988 the region enshrined a commitment to co-operation in the now famous Yamoussoukro declaration, calling for airlines to create mergers, joint ventures and consortia. Seven years later, the deadline is looming and little has been achieved.

What is new, however, is the mood of optimism. There is now a real belief that the region may finally be on the verge of achieving some of its long-standing goals on the back of the political change beginning to sweep the continent.

The choice of Johannesburg to host the airline talks is itself important. Before last year's elections sealed its reinstatement to the world community, Africa's most successful economy

*South African Airways: flying back from isolation and into a lead role in Africa*

was languishing in political and economic isolation. Now it is back and already showing signs of providing sub-Saharan Africa with a natural leader.

Mike Myburgh, chief executive at South African Airways (SAA), underlines the commitment of the carrier and the country to play a role as a good African citizen.

"SAA considers itself not only as a part of Africa, but as a significant player in the field of aviation on the African continent," he says.

The airline, which was once barred from overflying its neighbour states, has already stepped in to lead the launch of Alliance, the long-haul joint venture founded with Uganda and Tanzania. Myburgh also points to a wealth of technical resources that SAA is now able to share.

## POLITICAL PRAGMATISM

South Africa's re-emergence also appears to coincide with signs of a new political pragmatism appearing in many African states which may at last see governments loosen their grip on aviation.

Earlier this year, Kenya Airways began the search for a foreign partner as a first step towards privatisation. If it succeeds, the carrier will join only a handful of others that have strayed into the private sector.

Even the decision by the Zambian Government to let its national carrier collapse is being cited as an indication that airline ownership is no longer such a potent badge of national pride.

This optimism comes with a health warning. Progress is intimately bound up with the region's often unpredictable politics and poor economics, but the hope is that this, too, is beginning to mature.

"Never before has Africa been better ideologically poised for take-off...I'm convinced that the chemistry is right for a dramatic change in the economy of over the next decade," says Myburgh.

Much of the present fragmentation dates back to the politics which flowed from the early days of independence from colonial rule. The old colonial coalitions, such as East African Airways and Central African Airways, disintegrated into a mass of flag carriers as each independent state rushed to paint its flag on the side of an aircraft.

This fragmentation, says Capt Mohammed Ahmed, secretary general of the African Airlines Association (AFRAA), remains the single greatest restraint on growth.

The numbers speak for themselves. On a rough count there are at least 25 nominally international carriers in a continent which accounts for no more than 2% of world air traffic.

These carriers account for a total jet fleet of little more than 250 aircraft, smaller than almost any major US or European carrier. More than half of the aircraft are concentrated in the hands of SAA and the major North African carriers such as Egyptair, Air Algerie and Royal Air Maroc. The remainder are spread thinly across the vast African landmass.

Even taken collectively, with combined