

Controlling Bosnia's Skies

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Authorities come under criticism for failing to take full control of Bosnian airspace.

A 4.9 million euro contract for a new radar system at Sarajevo airport, giving Bosnia-Herzegovina part-control of its own airspace for the first time since the end of the war in 1995, has generated a wave of criticism.

The French company Thales will install the system within the next four months, but the radar only covers the lower zone airspace - below 3,000 meters - around the airport. But Bosnian upper air space will remain under the control of radar stations in neighbouring Croatia and Serbia.

Critics say allowing Croatia and Serbia to retain control of Bosnia's upper airspace infringes the country's sovereignty. They also point out that Sarajevo's neighbours retain 80 per cent of the income from the estimated 13 million US dollar taxes paid by airlines to fly through Bosnia's airspace.

Some believe Bosnia should have bought an "en-route" radar system that would also provide control of airspace above 3,000 metres.

There is also unease about locating the new radar at the airport, with a number of observers arguing that a system placed on one of the neighbouring mountains, such as Bukovik or Bjelasnica, would have improved its reach.

"It is an absolute nonsense to place the radar at the airport," said Zijo Isic, former director of the state directorate for civil aviation. "In practice, it means keeping Bosnia in the position of a colony of Serbia and Croatia, because radar at the airport can only see a very limited space. So we have to continue giving 80 per cent of the income to Croatia and Serbia."

The radar deal has triggered heated national debate and widespread frustration. According to one Bosnian expert close to the tender procedure, no proper technical or financial feasibility studies were carried out. There are no clear figures for the length of time it will take for the air traffic fees for Bosnia's lower airspace to repay the 4.9 million euro investment.

Yves Lambert, international coordinator for the development of Bosnia's civil aviation, has repeatedly stated that the Sarajevo airport system is sufficient for the country's needs, and that international experts consider the best location is at the airport itself. Lambert said other important aspects were also taken into consideration, including security, electrical connections and weather conditions.

There has also been concern over the terms of the tender. Critics say that by insisting on an installation period of 120 days the number of companies who could participate was significantly reduced, and that usually at least a year is needed to produce and install such a system. Only three companies pitched for the contract: Italy's AMS, Spain's INDRA and Thales.

Although the Bosnian Federal Transport and Communications ministry set up a mixed commission of local and western experts to decide on the tender, there has been criticism that local preferences were overruled. Some have complained that INDRA offered a system with both better radar and other associated equipment to improve air-traffic control efficiency.

However, Besim Mehmedic, federal minister of transport and communications, has denied claims that the tender process has been flawed. "I have full trust in the people who made the choice and I think that we have chosen the best," he said.

Amadeo Mandic, director of the Federal Directorate for Civilian Aviation, said that critics must understand that the radar was bought for the needs of Sarajevo airport, and not for the control of higher and middle air space. The criticism, he said, comes from incompetent people who have done nothing in the last decade to establish the necessary infrastructure for civilian aviation.

"This is the first radar that Bosnia has purchased since the war and I think that this is a great step towards claiming the air sovereignty of this country," Mandic said. "We can terminate at any moment the contracts over control of higher altitude air traffic that we have with Yugoslavia and Croatia. However, before that we have to purchase our own equipment, have our own personnel and knowledge to take over the job of controlling higher air space."

Until the end of last year, the NATO-led Stabilisation Force controlled air-traffic at Sarajevo airport. Currently, Sarajevo air-traffic control is conducted by the French agency Airco, under a 2 million-euro contract that is expected to last until the end of 2003. By then, the new radar system should be fully functioning and Bosnian controllers will take over.

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