

Round-the-clock air policing: skyguide is supporting the authorities and Air Force. Significant investments required.

Geneva, 11th May 2016. The hijacking of an Ethiopian Airlines flight in February 2014 by the co-pilot of the aircraft made headlines in the media around the world. On the morning of February 17th 2014, Ethiopian Airlines' flight 702 entered Swiss airspace, accompanied – in line with international agreements – by Italian and French fighter jets. Eventually, the plane landed in Geneva thanks to the professional assistance of the air traffic controllers on duty. Last Monday, the hijacker – who is requesting political asylum in Switzerland – was sentenced to a period of custodial therapy. This incident confirmed the need for a round-the-clock air policing service. The introduction of this extended service represents a big challenge for Swiss air traffic control.

The role of air traffic control during a hijacking

In this situation, the authorities are informed immediately, and skyguide's civil air traffic control services maintain a liaison with the hijackers. Their task is to evaluate the situation on board, as well as the aircraft's flight capability. In these cases, air traffic control concentrates on the safety of the passengers, the crew and the population on the ground, and tries – in line with its mission governed by international regulations – to get the plane landed as quickly as possible. Monitoring of the aeronautical situation by the Air Force, and the air traffic control by skyguide, are guaranteed round the clock, and the controllers are trained to handle such situations.

Challenges for the air police

When hijackers refuse to cooperate, the air police must intervene. These "hot missions" are also very demanding for skyguide. The pilots of the fighter aircraft are supported on the ground by skyguide's tactical fighter controllers. They help the pilots to accomplish their mission, whether this involves intercepting an aircraft, identifying it, establishing communication with the pilots (if necessary visually, if there is no radio contact), transmitting information on changes of direction or landing, or the use of weapons, as necessary.

Since the army obtained the assurance of a corresponding budget, the Air Force has worked on extending the service of the air police. Already from the start of this year, the air police has ensured a service from 08:00 to 18:00, 50 weeks per year. In 2017, its availability will be extended to 365 days per year. From 2019 it will be able to intervene from 06:00 to 22:00, and from end-2020, it will guarantee the service around the clock. The armed fighter aircraft are guided by the control tower at Payerne, and then from the Air Defense & Direction Centre that is managed from Dübendorf in peacetime. Skyguide is the only European air navigation service provider managing both civil air navigation and military aerodromes, as well as guiding fighter aircraft.

It is important not to underestimate the impact of the extension of this security system. To enable the expanded role of air navigation services, sixteen new jobs are created, representing for skyguide a cost of 25 million francs up to the complete commissioning of the system by January 1st, 2021. The training of new controllers takes between three and five years, depending on the tasks required of them. Skyguide must therefore embrace this new mission effectively, and without delay. As Daniel Weder, skyguide CEO, explains: "For skyguide, this mandate to support the authorities, the air force and the police has priority, and represents a major challenge. It will be a decisive contribution to Switzerland's national security network."

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Skyguide provides air navigation services for Switzerland and certain adjacent parts of neighbouring countries. With its 1500 employees at 14 locations in Switzerland, the company guides some 1.2 million civil and military flights a year safely and efficiently through Europe's busiest airspace. Skyguide is well integrated into the international air navigation services community and, with its innovative and customer-minded solutions, helps enhance Switzerland's appeal as a place to live, work and do business. The company is majority-owned by the Swiss Confederation, and is headquartered in Geneva.
