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South Korea Asks F.A.A. To Help Upgrade Standards

By DON KIRK
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Shocked by the United States Federal Aviation Administration's decision to downgrade South Korea's air safety rating, the nation's transport ministry said on Sunday that it would ask the F.A.A. to set up an office here to show what was needed to meet the agency's standards.

The F.A.A. told South Korea on Friday that its regulation of aviation safety fell short of international standards and that Korean carriers flying to the United States would not be allowed to expand their service, use American partners or use planes other than those they are now flying.

The action touched off protests in Seoul, but government officials, assured by the F.A.A. of full cooperation, dropped the angry tone over the weekend.

Rather, the transportation minister, Oh Jang Seop, apologized publicly for the shortcomings of his ministry, responsible for civil aviation, and promised "enormous efforts to bring our country's air-safety rating back to category one."

With a senior F.A.A. official scheduled to arrive here today, the ministry envisions a permanent F.A.A. presence as a channel for the technical expertise needed to guarantee inspection standards that the agency said were lacking. A separate flight safety office, possibly operated by Boeing with F.A.A. advice, might provide training of inspectors, one of the agency's main demands, the ministry said.

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At the same time, politicians from the government and the opposition parties promised to set aside their differences and come to terms on legislation for oversight of air safety, as required by the F.A.A. One critical issue, still unsettled, is whether to authorize a strong air safety committee that could function independently from the transport ministry, which controls the Korean Civil Aviation Bureau.

The F.A.A. action stirred a response 14 months after international auditors first found that the Korean Civil Aviation Bureau had gaps in regulations and no training program for inspectors.

By scrupulously adhering to the F.A.A.'s advice, the government hopes by the end of the year to regain the rating needed to be able to expand routes to the United States and enter into code-sharing deals with United States carriers.

The government's Bureau of Audit, which was never informed of the report by international auditors, threatened an investigation of the transport ministry that could cost the minister his job. Leaders of President Kim Dae Jung's party said they would recommend reprimands of the minister and directors beneath him first for paying no attention to the international regulators

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and then for not moving quickly enough when the F.A.A. warned of possible action several months ago.

The government saw the downgrading not only as a national disgrace but also as a threat to what they hoped would be a rising tide of trans-Pacific traffic before and during next summer's World Cup 2002 soccer finals, of which Korea is a co-host with Japan.

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