

PKR: Internal email shows air traffic problems ongoing
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Despite assurances otherwise, problems with the nation's air traffic control system persist, if internal emails from the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) dated late June are any indication, PKR says.

This contradicts claims by both Transport Minister Kong Cho Ha and contractor Advanced Air Traffic Systems Sdn Bhd (AAT) that the system is safe, as well as a purported letter of undertaking from the system's manufacturer Selex Sistemi Integrati SpA to rectify the problems by March.

At a press conference today, PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar distributed the five purported internal emails - two dated June 25 and three apparently written after June 27 - that furnished status updates on the alleged problems.

However, Malaysiakini could not immediately verify the authenticity of the said emails. Attempts have been made to reach DCA, Selex, and AAT for comment.

The reported problems include the radar screen going blank for anywhere between several seconds and 20 minutes, and flight plans needing manual updates, instead of running automatically as per specifications.

"Kuala Lumpur Air Traffic Control Centre (KLATCC) at the moment is very slow to respond. Transfer of aircraft, acceptance of aircraft and level (altitude) change is done with difficulty. Need a few times to click in order to respond," said one email written on June 25.

Another purported email on the same day said KLATCC had been breaking down frequently, and workstations are therefore required to record the breakdowns or "any other matters relating to air traffic control safety" in log books and daily reports.

In addition, it said that persons in charge need to be informed immediately by phone or SMS in the event of a flight data planner or radar breakdown lasting more than five minutes.

Nurul Izzah said the Transport Ministry must answer the allegations. If Selex and AAT had failed in their contractual obligations to repair the system, the contract should be declared void and open tenders must be called "to safeguard Malaysia's airspace".

The emails also said a Selex engineer named 'Fabio' had arrived at the two air traffic control centres.

Based on this, the Lembah Pantai MP rubbished claims that a technology transfer had driven up the cost of the RM128.4 million air traffic control system upgrade carried out by Selex and AAT.

"(There is) a problem of no technology transfer as set out in the contract, where DCA still has to wait for Italian engineers, which slows down any technical support needed, whereas the high contract cost is said to be needed because of the technology transfer," she said.

Demand for audit of air traffic system

Nurul Izzah reiterated her demand that the International Civil Aviation Organisation should be called in to audit the nation's air traffic system, which was last done in 2005.

She said she was prepared to organise fund-raising to pay for the audit if necessary, but noted that ICAO is prepared to provide the service for free, on the condition that it is officially invited by the government.

She also called for stakeholders such as airlines and pilots' unions to immediately pressure the government to call for the ICAO audit.

On a separate but related matter, Nurul Izzah questioned a RM244.5 million maintenance contract allegedly given to AAT via direct negotiation, even as problems are allegedly still plaguing the system it had installed.

The contract is to maintain 14 separate air traffic control systems and radar sites across the country for five years, starting from Aug 7 this year, with the option for a five-year extension.

These include the NATCC, radar and air traffic control systems in Kuching, Langkawi, Tawau and several other locations, and a radar station in Genting.

"The statement that no other company has expertise in the system installed by Selex and AAT is void, for every location listed should be tendered separately to get the best value for the people.

"In addition, I have been made to understand that the system currently used by KLIA is a combination of systems provided by 10 different companies," she said.

Nurul Izzah first raised the issues about air traffic control on June 8, alleging that the Malaysian Air Traffic Services Modernisation Programme (MATSM) Improvement Phase II (MIP2) was defective from the moment it was commissioned on Dec 13, 2011.

AAT founding shareholder and director Mohamad Muni then clarified that the contract was in fact awarded to Selex and AAT was just one of many local vendors supporting the project, raking in RM9 million over three years from 2009.

Mohamad also claimed that the ICAO standard for availability and safety is 99.5 percent, while the system operated by the DCA and the Malaysian armed forces averages at 99.97 percent over the past 17 years, thanks to AAT's services.

However, Nurul Izzah pointed out that Selex has a 30 percent stake in AAT, and AAT's website clearly names MATSM as among the projects it is involved in.

Asked about AAT's statement about its performance, she replied, "Then I'm sure they would have no problems supporting our demand that ICAO conducts an audit on the system.

"And I'm sure they will bring up this demand to the government of the day via the Transport Ministry," she said.