Opening address by the
Secretary General of the
International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO),
Dr. Fang Liu,
to the 2021 ICAO DRONE ENABLE Symposium

(Held Virtually, 13 April 2021, 9:10-9:25)

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

1. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to DRONE ENABLE 2021, ICAO's global symposium on unmanned aircraft systems, or UAS.

2. These events have been convened by us four times since 2017, and they play an important part in our ongoing efforts to establish a comprehensive and harmonized framework to support UAS and UAS traffic management (UTM) activities.

3. We're here to listen to what you have to say, to learn more about what you're innovating, and to work with you to move this industry forward.

4. The theme of this year's virtual DRONE ENABLE is:

Addressing Tomorrow's Challenges Today

5. It acknowledges that aviation continues to undergo a fundamental change in light of the widespread use of UAS, the shift to digital communications, and the emergence of advanced air mobility operators and other new entrants.

6. Until recently, many UAS operations were relegated to the fringes of traditional aviation, but as you're all very much aware, this is no longer the case.

7. On the contrary, we are now routinely seeing new types of aircraft, new use-cases, and new types of operations sharing airspace with traditional aviation.

8. This includes new businesses and humanitarian operations leveraging unmanned aviation technologies to better peoples' lives, including the transport of UN COVAX vaccine shipments from ports to hard-to-reach inland communities.

9. As standards setters, our efforts in supporting this dynamic growth must be guided first and foremost by the priority to ensure the safety, security, efficiency and sustainability of the aircraft and operations now being innovated. This is especially relevant in the context of the traditional manned aviation environments.

10. Regulators are on the front lines of this challenge, and many States and organizations are already contributing to the development of regulatory and certification frameworks in this area.

11. ICAO meanwhile leads the global effort to assess and harmonize these approaches through events such as this one, and through the hard work undertaken by relevant government and industry experts in the related panels and working groups we've established.

12. At our last Assembly, in 2019, States directed ICAO to evaluate its underlying policies, processes, and partnerships in order to make the assessment and integration of new entrants into the aviation system more efficient.

13. We reached out directly to innovators to help understand their expectations and needs, and efforts initially focused on integration and authorization processes for UAS have now resulted in new guidance material for the development and deployment of UAS traffic management (UTM) systems.

14. The Unmanned Aircraft Systems Advisory Group (UAS-AG), comprised of States, industry, and academic experts from around the world, was established to assist ICAO with these activities. It helps prioritize our work and develops the requests for information (RFIs) for these DRONE ENABLE symposia.

15. The UAS-AG also analyzes the submissions and information from these symposia to develop new guidance material editions, normally with a 12-month turnaround.

16. The more you bring to these discussions, therefore, the more we can help to enhance the guidance.

17. In addition to ongoing UAS work, ICAO is continuing to evolve the remotely piloted aircraft system (RPAS) regulatory framework for international operations.

18. When complete, this will provide the basis for certificated remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) to operate alongside traditional aircraft, employing similar procedures and separation standards.

19. The focus of this effort is on the highly capable segment of the unmanned aircraft systems family operating from airports, and interacting with air traffic control and other operators in a transparent, seamless environment.

20. The RPAS Panel's efforts will result in the adoption of hundreds of new Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) spanning all Annexes to the Chicago Convention.

21. The most recent package of SARPs, approved by Council last month, addresses Airworthiness and C2 Link requirements and will become available for implementation on 12 July.

22. SARPs addressing RPAS operations, air traffic management, and detect-and-avoid will follow over the next few years, most with a common applicability date in November 2026.

23. Additionally, to support States in addressing their immediate need to regulate domestic operations, ICAO publishes free model UAS regulations which can be tailored to fit the needs of individual States.

24. Challenges remain, of course, relating mostly to the continuous resource shortages faced by national regulators as they try to keep pace with the latest RPAS advances.

25. ICAO recognizes this, and we also recognize the importance of regulators having properly trained and qualified personnel on hand. We've therefore developed a new four-day training course on *Unmanned Aviation Fundamentals* which will be available shortly from our Global Aviation Training Office (GAT).

26. While COVID-19 has had a catastrophic impact on traditional aviation, it has also been an accelerator for many UAS and UTM innovations.

27. The reduction in traditional aviation has provided a favourable environment to accelerate the development and testing of new types of aircraft, new capabilities, technical solutions, and use cases.

28. And while our skies may be temporarily less busy today, we must still future-proof these new deployments to be compatible with traditional levels of aviation activity and capacity.

29. Much work still lies ahead to turn today's dreams into tomorrow's practical and profitable realities.

30. In closing, let me please reiterate that a domain as dynamic and innovative as UAS places a clear onus on industry and regulatory communities to work better together to achieve effective results.

31. ICAO is proud to be serving such a fundamental role in bringing together the diverse communities, which comprise the UAS ecosystem, as we are doing again today, and I will look forward to reviewing your results.

32. Thank you.