

# A high-flying expansion programme

## INTERVIEW WITH MAHMOOD RAZEE

MINISTER OF CIVIL AVIATION AND COMMUNICATION, MALDIVES



**MAHMOOD RAZEE** holds a Bachelor's degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the University of Manchester and, a Masters in Air Transport Engineering from the College of Aeronautics-Cranfield Institute of Technology UK. During his long career in Aviation, working in Civil Aviation Department he played a key role in, planning aviation internationally and regionally and was engaged in the preparation of Maldives' Civil Aviation Regulation (1991). In addition to his ministerial responsibilities, Mr Razee is also the Chairman of National Air Transport Facilitation Committee and National Aviation Security Committee.

### Could you give us an overview of the ministry's role within the new administration and outline your main priorities?

The ministry is currently tasked with overseeing and developing three sectors: civil aviation; communication technology; and information technology. As regards civil aviation, our role is regulatory, so we are in the process of creating a civil aviation authority for Maldives. This will reduce the ministry's role, and is part of this administration's commitment to streamline government by reducing costs and the overall number of ministries.

Aviation is absolutely vital to the economy of Maldives. All our tourists arrive by air. This means we must have both the capability and the means to guarantee air safety. Malé airport will need to offer better services and facilities, and to this end there is a master plan in place. There are congestion problems there two or three days of the week when all the European flights arrive or depart. This issue is being addressed. Our aim is to privatise the airport authority. The ministry is also responsible for internal aviation. Of the 700,000 tourists who come here each year, 60 per cent now move around the islands by air. This is done through a fleet of some 40 flying boats, which make a total of around three hundred flights a day. Again, safety is paramount to our reputation. We are constantly improving standards and regulations.

### How are you addressing the issue of training people to work in high-tech industries like aviation and telecommunications?

We face two challenges here: quite simply, we don't have enough trained people; and also it is difficult to retain trained, skilled people. We work with international civil aviation organisations to improve standards and establish criteria for training and skills levels. We have close ties with the International Civil Aviation Organisation and with the European Union on a range of safety and security issues. We also want to establish a South Asia regional initiative. Our objective is to harmonise standards within the region. If national regulations are the same, then it will be easier for us to share personnel. We work to European standards.

### What are the opportunities for international investors within Maldives' aviation sector?

We want to increase the number of visitors to the islands. We will do this by focusing on new markets

and by developing new resorts. This expansion will require the upgrading of our two international airports, our three domestic airports, and the creation of new airports throughout the islands so that we can get visitors from the main airport to their destination as quickly as possible, and avoid them having to spend the night in Malé.

To alleviate congestion, redevelopment of the old Malé International Airport has begun; a new international terminal has been built adding four more gates and more facilities. The construction of a new runway is due in the next 5-10 years and the airport's size is to be increased. Furthermore, a regional terminal for all domestic flights has been built to alleviate the pressure on Malé International. The Maldivian government has invited experienced international airport operators to negotiate a viable and mutually beneficial joint venture to manage, develop and promote Malé International Airport. We will put the running of our other airports out to tender as well.

Our expansion programme aims to develop 63 islands. For the moment, we have slated 10 airports for these planned resorts to be viable. We are offering companies who want to build and operate new airports the opportunity to develop the islands, and to work with hotel chains.

### What is your ministry doing as regards communication?

We are focused on extending internet access to all the islands through WiMAX technology to do this. WiMAX can provide broadband wireless access up to 30 miles for fixed stations, and three to 10 miles for mobile stations. This administration is committed to e-government, so we are keen to familiarise people with the internet. When the e-government comes in, the population will be able to apply for passports, driving licences, and other documentation, as well as filling in tax returns on line. At the same time, the ministry is laying down new legislation on issues related to data protection. In line with our zero-carbon footprint policy, we intend to digitalise as many documents as possible. For the moment we have internet kiosks on most of the larger islands. ICT is an area that could be of interest to investors. We have Indian companies that specialise in call centres and back-room operations looking at setting up operations here. 