

Transport department pledges not to bar Emirates from SA skies

By [Carol Paton](#)

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The Department of Transport early last week provided a public assurance that it will not prevent Emirates Airline from flying to SA, despite the dispute over the bilateral air services agreement between SA and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).



The announcement follows threats from South African officials last week and over the weekend that unless the UAE acceded to an urgent meeting, its services could face "disruption" and its foreign operator's permit could be withdrawn.

Yesterday, officials in the department toned down the war talk, with spokesman Tiyani Rikhotso saying: "The Department of Transport has noted with concern media reports insinuating intentions to halt the services of Emirates Airline to SA.

"We wish to state categorically that there are no intentions on the part of the South African government to do so."

The drama began after Emirates introduced a fourth daily flight between Johannesburg and Abu Dhabi last month.

The airline said it was doing so in terms of a bilateral air services agreement and memorandum of understanding between SA and the UAE, which allowed for the additional flight. A letter had been obtained from the department authorising the flight.

But department deputy director-general Zakhele Thwala later withdrew the authorisation, saying SA had made its intention clear that it wanted to renegotiate the bilateral agreement. The official who had sent the letter was suspended.

Emirates then obtained a court order stating that the bilateral agreement was in force. The flight went ahead on October 27.

But the department remained aggrieved and last week threatened "disruption" of services unless an urgent meeting was convened to discuss the bilateral agreement.

The threat appears to have galvanised the UAE into action. Thwala has travelled to the UAE for talks with the relevant officials.

Yesterday, both departmental officials and Transport Minister Dipuo Peters said they believed that the fourth flight was operating without the necessary permission.

"It must be noted that this flight is currently in operation on the basis of 'a letter of authorisation' to do so, which was unduly granted by an official ... with no authority to do so," the department said.

"In our attempt to correct this anomaly, Emirates Airline approached a court ... and, technically, the fourth flight is currently operating on the basis of the court (order) as we have stated our intention to withdraw the authorisation."

Peters said it was urgent the meeting be held. "It's critical to urgently deal with any issue that may seek to raise questions around our bilateral relations with the UAE."

Source: Business Day

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