

DPE hits back at disgruntled pilots over vaccine flight claims

The Department of Public Enterprises (DPE) dismissed claims made by a pilots' association that the South African Airways flight transporting a consignment of Covid-19 vaccines was an unnecessary expensive exercise as untrue...



The second consignment of Johnson and Johnson vaccines arrived in SA on Saturday. Image: Twitter

According to a [News24 report](#), the chair of the SAA Pilots' Association (Saapa), Grant Back, said the flight would cost tax payers and the government about R5m, "a price tag that could have been avoided if the government used another commercial flight scheduled for the same day".

"At the moment Saapa members, who have been locked out since 18 December last year because no agreement could be reached on ending an apartheid-era Regulating Agreement (RA) (in existence since 1988). SAAPA are only representing a minority of pilots," the statement from DPE said.

"SAAPA has done everything in its power to discredit the commencement of flights at SAA because it is happening without their members. They have raised unfounded allegations of safety in the last week regarding the preparations for vaccine repatriation flight. They are now raising a new allegation about the financial viability of the flight," it said.

"Once again a minority of SAA pilots tried to protect their own self-interests and pockets by attempting to discredit a flight to transport vaccines back into the country to protect health workers from the Covid-19 pandemic."

Intensifying cargo business

The flight to Brussels also serves as a test relaunch of the SAA Cargo business. "Many airlines around the world, including Lufthansa and Ethiopian, have intensified their cargo businesses while the passenger loads declined sharply, in order to bring in revenue. There will be many such flights by SAA in the months to come. This will also include transport of vaccines from manufacturers to African countries during the next months," the statement said.

“The Brussels flight to bring back the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is proof that a restructured and well-managed airline operated in a professional and sustainable manner can support key economic sectors – including travel, tourism and even cargo to solidify South Africa as an African gateway to international markets.”

It would also ensure that sovereign logistics capacity is sustained – just as when repatriation flights were used to bring back home South Africans stranded in various parts of the world under Level 5 lockdown.

“Over time cargo will become a profitable business. Partnerships with private sector will be considered at the appropriate time. These flights will become commercially viable.

“The current flight carried goods to Brussels and will bring back the vaccine and more cargo on the return leg and this was to ensure that the flight and the overall operation is cost effective,” says the DPE.

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