ACI ADVISORY BULLETIN

Airport disruptions caused by activism

Montreal, 14 March 2022 – In recent years, activism and protests have disrupted airport operations in different parts of the world. In light of the emerging risk to airports, this ACI Advisory Bulletin provides high-level global guidance to members on assessing the risks to their operations, preparing adequately, ensuring the continuity of their operations, and recovering quickly after an activism-related disruption—with the objectives of maintaining safety and minimizing the impact on customer experience and operations.

1. Scope

This Advisory Bulletin focuses on unauthorized actions and protests leading to disruptions to normal operations at airports. These disruptions may be organized, intentional events motivated by activism or ad-hoc causes by groups of individuals.

Some jurisdictions may allow peaceful demonstrations to take place on airport property. Usually, national or local laws will provide a framework for and clarify whether and how demonstrators can legally obtain a permit to do so. The airport may choose to dedicate a specific location and define conditions under which such lawful demonstrations may take place.

Disruptions caused by the unauthorized use of drones at or around airports are a real concern as in some cases these may be motivated by activism. However, counter-drone response is not covered at length in this Advisory Bulletin. ACI World issued a separate Advisory Bulletin on drone-related disruption to aircraft operations in January 2019.

Finally, airports may see their operations disrupted by isolated persons attempting to access the airside or security restricted area for unclear motives. There have been many instances of individuals jumping over a fence or attempting to get on board a parked aircraft. These are equally outside the scope of this Advisory Bulletin.

2. Global threat and risk picture

Despite a recent reduction in overall aviation operations, airports still provide a symbolic, visible, and increasingly attractive backdrop for activities intended to cause disruption or disorder without having to cause loss of life. Activism is on the rise globally, as groups

are easily able to mobilize and get organized in different locations, in particular using social media and digital communication channels, and often without a clearly identifiable leader or lead organization.

The current increase in social consciousness is prompting groups to take radical action to raise attention to their causes. One of these causes is climate change, leading to movements such as "flygskam" (flight shame) in Europe and Extinction Rebellion, which organize actions and protests in restricted areas of airports. Politically motivated protests have also severely disrupted airport operations in the last years which have led to significant operation disruptions and in some cases full airport closures.

2.1 Examples of modus operandi

The groups of individuals who have organized these types of disruptive events have adopted numerous tactics to cause disruption, in principle without or with minimal physical harm. These include some of the following, although actors have proven to be creative and innovative in their approaches:

- Occupying or blocking landside roadways or entrances to terminal areas. These blockages often include individuals physically bound together (with ropes, chains or even glue) as well as the use of vehicles or other large objects.
- Occupying portions of the terminal landside area and disrupting or blocking passenger and staff movements including airline ticket counters, security screening checkpoints, or arrival areas.
- Accessing restricted areas by accessing the perimeter of the airport, in a vehicle or on foot, often by jumping over or cutting through perimeter fences.

2.2 Impacts

Unauthorized actions and protests have a direct operational impact on airports, passengers, and staff including flight delays, cancellations and even airport closures. While generally the intention is not to cause harm, possible interference with aircraft, navigation, and equipment on the airside may impact the overall safety of air transport operations. These events can also have an impact on the overall level of security at the airport when security resources must be reallocated to manage the disruption rather than ensuring their normal duties.

Indirectly, disruptions hamper air transport, tourism, and ultimately the national economy. Airports are not only key assets connecting regions and countries, but also important drivers of economic benefit to their regions—as such, many are defined as critical national infrastructure.

3. ACI Policy

ACI's Policy Handbook (2020) states that airports should prioritize the safety and security of passengers and visitors utilizing terminal facilities during disruptions. Airports and key stakeholders, such as law enforcement, are responsible to prevent or minimize disruptions to air traffic and ensure the safety of passengers and visitors in their facilities. Guidelines addressing the identified risks should be developed through ongoing dialogue

across airport stakeholders and should address operational disruptions including irregular operations and activism.

4. Airport preparedness and response

4.1 Planning and preparedness

Airport operators should collaborate with national and local security authorities for the establishment of operational plans to address the various types of events that may occur and minimize disruptions to aviation activities. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly established and documented. This should include a well-defined and well-understood command structure which will assist in managing any "grey areas" of possible overlap.

In some jurisdictions, the responsibility for preparing for and responding to an event may rest with national and local security authorities, including law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement would typically have responsibility for ensuring that public order is maintained. This can be highly dynamic and the strategies for containment are important to allow airports to continue operations. In addition, through intelligence gathering actions, authorities are often aware of protests or planned disruptions that might affect airport operations prior to their arrival on airport property.

As part of preparedness for airport disruptions, a vulnerability assessment should be considered based on credible threat scenarios. The vulnerability assessment will identify the impact on and uncover major weak points of the airport susceptible to damage or business processes subject to disruption during an event. A vulnerability assessment looks at the relationship between assets (for example people, property, operations, environment, infrastructure) and determines to what extent an asset may be exposed to a potential threat. An understanding of vulnerabilities will assist with developing strategies that reduce risk from future events and will be the basis for response plans.

Based on the threat identification and vulnerability assessment, airports should include provisions for certain types of disruptions in their Aerodrome Emergency Plans. These may include scenario-specific plans to address activism-related events and/or political protests. Plans should describe the event, the assumptions, and lay out rules of engagement (ROEs) with demonstrators for first responders. As an event unfolds, it is critical for first responders to have a clear understanding of thresholds for action, mutual aid options, and the proper response actions approved by leadership.

4.2 Intelligence gathering

Airport operators should establish privileged contacts with the relevant national or local authorities to receive specific intelligence on any potential or imminent threats. These arrangements should establish a framework under which the national security authorities and law enforcement agencies can share relevant intelligence and information.

Many airports already monitor social media for information impacting their airport. Social media channels can be an important source of information, especially when protest groups are organized through social media—giving useful insights on any plans being

established prior to the event. Airports should develop processes to allow for the sharing of such information with other airport stakeholders and the relevant security authorities.

In the immediate lead-up to or in the tactical phase of an event, one of the main tools to use will be the airport's CCTV feeds. Monitoring these within the airport operations centre, for example, can allow the relevant airport stakeholders and security agencies to identify or pre-empt a possible threat to an area and trigger a response. To support this, airport officials and law enforcement in plain clothes patrolling terminals could be utilized to assess situations and can act as a decisive tool in identifying disruptions caused by activism.

In addition, to support these tactical intelligence gathering actions, some airports have established platforms for employees and passengers to report unusual behavior or incidents.

4.3 Mitigations

To mitigate the impact of disruptions to airport operations, the following measures may be considered:

- **Controlling public transportation to the airport**: To reduce the ease of access to the airport by protesters, the airport may consider working with public transport and mass transit organizations to suppress certain stops or routes until further notice.

- **Controlling vehicular traffic on airport access roadways:** Airports should be vigilant in monitoring the condition of access roadways to the airport. It is important to work with authorities to discuss the establishment of laws and regulations to deny such access, if not already available. Protesters may use vehicles to restrict or block travel on roadways leading to the airport. Mitigation strategies include working with local law enforcement and police to establish surveillance points at key inbound roadways. These locations should have the ability to reroute traffic to another roadway leading away from the airport. Strategically located vehicles can move into traffic and close traffic at the first sign of protesters approaching. Once traffic is stopped, police can then create a controlled access point to allow staff and passengers to access the airport and protestors to be rerouted. Unpredictable controls may also prove effective in deterring protesters while avoiding bottlenecks and delays for legitimate travellers. However, it should be noted that protesters at some airports have managed to bypass these restrictions by walking to the airport. Properly sized tow trucks may also be pre-positioned to remove non-compliant vehicles.

- **Controlling access to the terminal**: The airport may restrict access to the terminal building to bona fide passengers only. To access the terminal, passengers should be asked to produce a valid air ticket or boarding pass for an upcoming flight (paper or in electronic format), and a valid identification document. This should be communicated clearly on the airport website, social media, and other channels, with an invitation for passengers to arrive earlier than usual at the airport. This measure may only partly

mitigate the threat: at some airports, protesters created fake boarding passes or purchased tickets to be able to enter the sterile area.

- **Airport stakeholder communication**: To limit disruptions caused by activism to landside/public areas, it is of great importance that knowledge about a future or ongoing disruption is communicated to airport stakeholders proactively. The dissemination of this information will allow all stakeholders to raise their awareness/alertness towards protesters trying to cause disruptions. This information is particularly important for personnel controlling access to the security restricted area.

- **Facilitating access to passengers:** The airport should ensure that departing and arriving passengers are able to reach the airport and depart from it safely, through clearly marked paths. The airport should also make sure that first responders are able to access and egress from the terminal to deal with all emergency situations and that all evacuation routes are clear of obstacles at all times.

- **Facilitating access to airport workers:** To minimize the disruption to airport operations, airport employees also need safe access and egress. The airport should develop contingency plans to facilitate employee access that could include dedicated transportation, off-site parking, and alternative routes to the airport. Depending on the nature of the protests, airport employees may be encouraged to hide their badges or turn their airport uniforms inside out before arriving at work.

- **Perimeter protection:** To be able to adequately address the new threats, it is recommended to review the current perimeter protection measures for its vulnerabilities to the new threats and understand which measures are required to help mitigate the risks faced. All reasonable and proportionate measures should be considered according to the 5 D's principle: Deter – Detect – Deny – Delay – Defend.

- **Aerodrome Emergency Plan activation:** In order to coordinate response to the events and to facilitate the exchange of information across all involved stakeholders, the airport operator should consider the activation of the Airport Emergency Plan prior to an event. Any scenario-specific plans and protocols that have been developed should be activated, or alternatively, the standard provisions contained in the emergency plan can be used.

5. Further reference

Further guidance and information can be found in the following ACI documentation:
- The *Landside Security Handbook* (2018) focuses on the publicly accessible part of airports. It provides best practices in addressing disruptions on the landside area of airports and provides detailed information on emergency planning, response to ongoing situations, and recovery after disruptions.

- The *Emergency Preparedness and Contingency Planning Handbook* (2014) assists airports in developing and implementing a robust Aerodrome Emergency Plan (AEP), including restoration of operations after an emergency.
- The *Airport Business Continuity Management Handbook* (2019) provides guidance to help airports mitigate against, prepare for, respond to, and recover from potential events that may disrupt normal business operations, including social/civil unrest situations.

6. Notes

1. State and regional regulations supersede the information contained in this advisory where applicable.

2. For more information, please contact security@aci.aero.

About ACI World

Airports Council International (ACI), the trade association of the world's airports, was founded in 1991 with the objective of fostering cooperation among its member airports and other partners in world aviation, including the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Air Transport Association and the Civil Air Navigation Services Organization. In representing the best interests of airports during key phases of policy development, ACI makes a significant contribution toward ensuring a global air transport system that is safe, secure, efficient, and environmentally sustainable. As of January 2022, ACI serves 717 members, operating 1950 airports in 185 countries.