

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES AFTER AN AIR DISASTER



Mr Chong Chow Wah, Senior Investigator and Head of Air Accident Investigation Bureau of Singapore's Operations Sections, presenting Mr Alain Guillardou with a token of appreciation at the talk "Communicating with families after an air disaster"

For aviation personnel, the communication with Next-of-Kin of passengers (NOKs) after an air disaster is "probably the worst moment of your professional life," remarked Mr Alain Guillardou, former Head of Information and International Affairs Department of the French Bureau of Investigation and Team Leader of the EU-China Civil Aviation Authority Project in Beijing, China. Speaking at the talk "Communicating with families after an air disaster" organised by Singapore Aviation Academy (SAA) as part of SAA's Aviation Insight Series, he emphasised how various entities – airport operators, airlines and authorities – need to work hand in hand and craft a communication plan that will enable them to manage NOKs with sensitivity and empathy as well as handle pressure from the media.

Taking participants through the communication process that plays out after an air disaster, he noted that a critical moment for aviation professionals is when they receive notification of an air accident. Airport operators have to immediately gather and verify the facts from their own operations as well as from the airlines and manufacturer. All entities involved have to work

together to ensure crucial information such as flight number, intended flight path, aircraft type and the number of persons on board is made public as soon as possible, which, based on the latest EU regulations, is to be published at the latest within two hours of notification of the accident. He suggested some measures that can be put in place at this point to support the NOKs, such as medical assistance and psychological counselling, a toll-free 24/7 hotline and a dedicated page on the corporate website, where the management can provide timely updates. The commencement of air investigations is another crucial period in relation to an air disaster. During this time, ensuring that air safety investigators deliver their results to the victims' families or associations before making it public is important.

Throughout the process, face-to-face communication with NOKs should always be conducted with the highest level of sensitivity. Officials need to work as a team and handle questions with great empathy. They also need to be careful not to unwittingly set unrealistic expectations even as they work to assuage the fears and anxieties of the NOKs. Being able to support and communicate clearly to family members during such times is challenging, which is why it is important that relevant aviation personnel are trained and prepared for such incidents.