

Sri Lankan pilots eye growing Indian aviation market

With the opening up of Indian aviation to foreigners, pilots from Sri Lanka have been eyeing the expanding Indian job market.

At least 15 of them, including three or four expatriates, have joined one Indian airline or the other in recent months, a spokesman of the Sri Lankan Pilots Association told IANS.

'Jet Airways and Kingfisher are offering high salaries to get recruits from Sri Lanka. Kingfisher is planning to go international in its operations and is desperately looking for experienced pilots,' he said.

Middle East airlines like Emirates, Qatar and Etihad are also attracting Sri Lankan pilots.

'So far Sri Lanka has lost 25 pilots. But we have also had four or five joining us from overseas. There is a global churning in the aviation industry in which airlines everywhere are gaining and losing personnel,' the spokesman said.

India is facing a shortfall of over 600 pilots. In 2007, for instance, India needed 4,540 pilots but had only about 3,900. Not all the vacancies could be filled with local recruits.

The prospect of getting pilots from abroad to fill the gap has improved immeasurably because of a significant change in New Delhi's policy on the recruitment of foreign nationals.

'India is now giving work visas without a fuss to personnel of the executive cadre if the companies make a request for them,' said an Indian official who did not want to be identified.

India has not waited for the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Sri Lanka to throw open its services sector to Sri Lankan executives.

Sri Lankan companies that operate in India like Brandix Textiles (based in Visakhapatnam) and Aitken Spence (with resort hotels in Kerala) have been allowed to employ their own nationals in executive positions.

But when the CEPA is signed, recruitment of foreign personnel will get legitimised and opportunities will naturally increase.

Indian Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh said in Colombo recently that India would not insist on reciprocity when opening up its services sector to Sri Lankans once the CEPA was signed.

Ramesh's statement is partly founded on a shortage of personnel at the highest levels in Indian industry thanks to the booming economy. The supply of trained and experienced personnel does not match the growing demand.

A survey conducted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) showed high-level personnel shortages in a variety of industries and economic sectors.

'Shortages were seen at the shop floor level,' an Indian official said.

Partly because of the shortage, executive salaries have been hiked to very competitive levels in India. It is said that in recent times, salary increases have been the highest in India and China because of their growing economies.

The CEPA, marked by liberalization of the trade in services, will benefit Sri Lankans more than Indians because there will be a movement from Sri Lanka to India and not the other way round, Indian officials said.

Sri Lanka has been wary about liberalization in the trade in services because of the fear that Indian professionals will swamp the Sri Lankan market and squeeze the locals out.

But Indian officials said this is unlikely to happen, given the economic conditions in India and Sri Lanka.

The Indian economy is booming with an expanding industrial base while the Sri Lankan economy is stagnant with a dormant industrial base. This difference will influence the movement of service personnel.

If today Sri Lankan pilots are seeking work in India and not the other way round, it is because of a boom in Indian aviation and deterioration in the condition of Sri Lankan aviation. Sri Lankan aviation received a major blow when Sri Lankan Airlines, the state-run national carrier, did not renew the management contract with Emirates. And the Tamil ethnic conflict continues to hamper domestic aviation.

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