

Stricter rules on aircraft maintenance needed

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PETALING JAYA: Two light airplane crashes six months apart have prompted calls for stricter rules on who can maintain small private aircraft and a stronger emphasis on training pilots to be able to tell whether their planes are fit to fly.

It is also important for pilots to analyse possible anomalies before flying their planes, said aviation expert and trainer, Associate Prof Dr Mohd Harridon Mohamed Suffian.

"It is imperative for pilots to be comprehensively trained in assessing or evaluating the health of their aircraft and learn how to analyse data on aircraft maintenance in order to properly detect anomalies," said Mohd Harridon of UniKL's Malaysian Institute of Aviation Technology.

Currently, aircraft maintenance and overhaul were not subjects that are taught in depth to cadet pilots and this impairs their ability to assess whether their planes are safe to fly.

"This itself is an aviation risk



Unfortunate event: Debris from a light plane crash around an oil palm plantation area near Sekolah Kebangsaan Tok Muda, Kapar, last month.

where pilots are not fully aware of the tangible conditions of the aircraft they are flying," said Mohd Harridon, who is also the

institute's Aviation Search and Rescue head.

His comments follow the preliminary report released yesterday by the Air Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) on the fatal BK 160 Gabriel light airplane crash in Kapar, Klang, last month.

Six months before that, a Beechcraft 390 Premier 1 aircraft flying from Langkawi to Subang crashed onto the Guthrie Corridor Expressway in Elmina, Shah Alam, killing 10 people including two road users.

In the Kapar crash, the AAIB found that "irregular maintenance activities" had been performed on the plane, including the installation of uncertified and/or non-conforming aircraft parts.

The AAIB said the aircraft had been serviced by unauthorised maintenance organisations or persons who were not qualified.

One of those irregular activities was the removal of the aircraft's nose landing gear and the installation of a new one by "unauthorised maintenance personnel or persons who were not appropriately qualified."

These findings were "a grave safety issue," said Mohd Harridon, adding that maintenance processes must be done according to the aircraft maintenance manual and

by properly-certified personnel.

"This is why we have licensed aircraft engineers to certify any ongoing maintenance activities.

"There were questions about the maintenance practices of this particular aircraft, where it was observed that it was not maintained by those who are properly qualified and authorised," he said.

Mohd Harridon added that the industry should adopt the predictive maintenance method where data on the wear and tear of aircraft components are collected and analysed in a periodic fashion. Even though this approach incurs extra costs as it requires installing a health monitoring system in aircraft, its benefits outweigh that initial cost, he said.

"Maintenance would only be started when it is optimally necessary and thus maintenance costs and man-hours are exponentially reduced.

"Safety would still be retained as predictive maintenance would duly indicate any prominent anomalies based on the analysed data, and the snags are detected at the earliest timeframe," he added.