

Aviation, Home Ministries spar over regulating drones

Tussle between aircraft safety versus security and privacy

The Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) has raised a few objections to the Home Ministry's bid to frame a new law to regulate unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), loosely referred to as drones.

The Director-General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has told the Home Ministry that licensing and safety of all aircraft — manned or unmanned — was their domain, The Hindu has learnt.

Recently, the Home Ministry circulated a draft law to regulate the low-flying objects for inter-ministerial consultations. The regulations were circulated more than a year after the DGCA put out draft guidelines for obtaining unique identification numbers for citizens to use drones in the public domain.

Safety oversight

Last month, operations at the IGI airport in Delhi were held up for two hours after an Air Asia pilot spotted a low-flying object while landing.

“The DGCA has the domain of aircraft safety. As the aviation regulator we need to ensure that aircraft should be safe and remote pilots should be adequately trained,” DGCA Director- General B.S. Bhullar told The Hindu .

“However, we are clear that issues related to security can be dealt with agencies under the MHA,” he added.

At a meeting at the North Block in late August, civil aviation officials informed the Home Ministry that as per International Civil Aviation Organisation guidelines, aircraft, whether manned or unmanned, does not affect its status as an aircraft and the safety oversight is the responsibility of the DGCA.

A senior Home Ministry official said the need for a new law arose after it received representations from a couple of industrial houses who wanted to use UAVs to monitor oil pipelines and coalfields.

“The DGCA has the capacity to detect aircraft of a particular size and [which] fly at a certain altitude. It has radars to detect their presence. The unmanned objects, if they fly low, cannot be detected by any radar. It has security and privacy issues,” a Home Ministry official said.