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As Ndola, on Zambia's Copperbelt, waits for a new $500 million ultra-modern **airport**, the management team at its current airport, Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe International (NLA), are hoping to offer 21st century aviation services using vintage infrastructure. Humphrey Nkonde reports.

NLA, like Zambia’s other three international airports, is controlled by the state-managed Zambia Airports Corporation Limited (ZACL).

The land-locked country’s other three international airports are Mfuwe, mainly serving South Luangwa Game Park; Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula, near Livingstone’s Victoria Falls; and Kenneth Kaunda, in the capital, Lusaka.

Formerly Ndola Airport, NLA has six large aircraft parking bays, which are used by local and international airlines, private and charter aircraft.

The airport’s greatest assets are its parallel concrete runways – 10L/28R (2,515m x 46m, 8,250ft x 150ft) and 10R/28L (1,219m x 23m, 4,000ft x 75ft) – which has provided it with double orientation in passenger and cargo transport.

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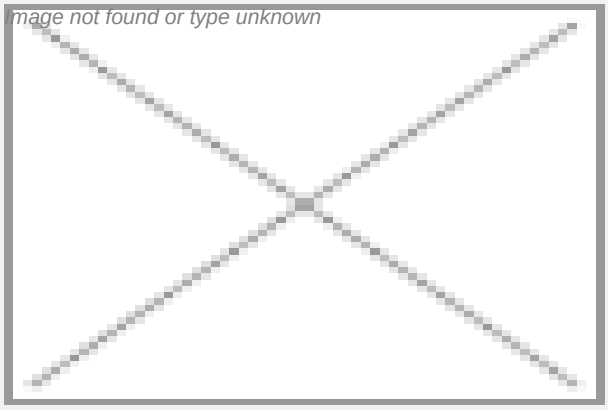
NLA was constructed by the British colonial government in 1938 and served as a military base for the Royal Navy's active flying squadrons during World War II.
To this day, the original terminal, with its dome-shaped roof, reminiscent of the Nissen huts common at old military facilities, signifies the airport's beginning.



Ancillary structures have been added but one of the Nissen huts is also being used by international and local airlines as a concourse for bookings, using electronic ticketing, and partly as a lounge for domestic passengers.
The old control tower is still in use as an office for the airport's security wing.
Use of the old tower fits into the airport's marketing strategy of using vintage infrastructure, as it can attract tourists interested in the history of the British Empire and World War II.
NLA uses a chalkboard flight display, while airports in Lusaka and Livingstone have advanced to electronic ones.
Another historic aspect about the former Ndola Airport is that the DC-6B aircraft, carrying the second United Nations Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, who was on a peacekeeping mission in the Congo, should have landed there in the early hours of September 18 1961.
The crew communicated to the control tower their intention to land before the aircraft crashed, instantly killing Hammarskjöld and 14 other aides, as well as burning about 80% of the fuselage of the aircraft that Transair Sweden AB chartered to the UN.

The 16th passenger, Sergeant Harold Julien, a UN security guard who survived the crash but died a few days later, told Ndola Central Hospital officials and the police that there was an explosion before the plane crashed.
Plans are under way for Ndola to have an ultra-modern airport on a 2,000-hectare piece of land on the outskirts of the city, requiring slightly more than $500 million to develop.
Designs have already been developed by Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC). One reason advanced for the relocation is that
NLA has no space to extend runways. "Wide-bodied aircraft require longer runways," said airport manager Joseph Mumbi. "We cannot extend because of residential housing developments around the airport."
There is also no space for a new terminal building, airport hotel, warehouses and housing units.
ZACL has, over the years, been relying on income from airport services; the reason a mixed investment strategy has been crafted in order to earn revenue from non-aeronautical infrastructure such as the airport hotel and houses.
Ndola, Copperbelt's headquarters, is the gateway to the fast-growing mining region of North Western Province.

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It is also a few minutes' flight to Congo's Lubumbashi and a gateway to small provincial airports within Zambia in Mansa in Luapula Province, Solwezi in North Western Province and Kasama in Northern Province.
Copperbelt's largest airport also serves as a facility for technical stops and refuelling for regional airlines.
In spite of using vintage infrastructure, NLA, located 3km from the Ndola's central business district, is serviced by Africa's major airlines, including Star Alliance members, Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways.
Ethiopian Airlines, using Boeing 737-800s and 737-700s, has daily flights on a triangular route plan from Addis Abba's Bole International Airport to Ndola through Lubumbashi.
From Johannesburg's Oliver Tambo International Airport, South African Airways uses Airbus A319-100s for flights to Ndola four times a week on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.
Using Boeing 707-700, Kenya Airways has direct flights into Ndola from Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport seven days a week, while South Africa's Airlink, with British Aerospace Jetstreams in its fleet, has everyday flights between Ndola and Johannesburg.
Proflight Zambia, which also uses British Aerospace Jetstreams, is the only local airline with scheduled flights present at NLA.
The airport has been handling more than 200,000 passengers annually since 2011, double the 2009 total. In 2014, the number increased to 266,702.
Mumbi noted that although a large proportion of cargo landed at Kenneth Kaunda International Airport, most of the clients were located on the Copperbelt.
He said NLA was capable of handling cargo for the Copperbelt and North Western Province directly from Europe, or through air hubs in Nairobi and Addis Ababa.

Mumbi explained that it was possible for aircraft, such as Ethiopian Airlines' Boeing MD-11CF cargo aircraft, to land at the current facility since it uses concrete runways.
That feature played a role in the airlifting of copper and receiving of fuel from Dar-es-Salaam after Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) gained independence from Britain on October 24 1964.
On November 11 1965, Ian Smith, the late prime minister of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), announced a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI), which resulted in the closure of borders between Zambia and the then Southern Rhodesia.
As a result, Zambia could not access South African ports for its copper exports to global markets and fuel from a refinery in Umtali in Southern Rhodesia.
The late Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, then Foreign Affairs Minister in President Kenneth Kaunda's government, was brave enough to blame Britain's failure to intervene following Smith's pronouncement.
It was no coincidence that the fifth president, Michael Sata, on September 28 2011 re-named Ndola Airport after Mr Kapwepwe.
Hosted at NLA, the Zambia Flying Doctor Service (ZFDS) benefited from the transformation of the former Ndola Airport to civil aviation from military services.
In 1965, Dr James Lawless proposed aviation- based medical services and Dr Kaunda's government made ZFDS a state-run institution by an Act of Parliament in 1967.
During the 1960s to the 1980s, ZFDS mainly handled maternity and general trauma cases in hard-to-reach rural areas, mostly in the country's northern half.
However, since the 1990s there has been a shift towards road-based accidents due to increased use of motor vehicles, under-utilisation of rail transport and population growth.
A combination of old and new trends in ZFDS' health service delivery has altered its aviation services, requiring additional helicopters and continued use of fixed-wing aircraft.
The Zambian Government is in the process of acquiring an ambulance helicopter for ZFDS so that it can respond to road accidents, while the three other helicopters would be used by the Zambia

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Police Service for security operations.
One problem with Zambia is that it does not have an established company specialising in advanced aircraft maintenance repair and overhaul (MRO), even at its main international airport in Lusaka.

ZFDS, which has a hangar at NLA, can develop a greater MRO capability since it has space at one of Zambia's busiest airports and aircraft maintenance engineers.

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