

BUSINESS & FINANCE

# Saab Tests Remote Air-Traffic Towers

By DAVID PEARSON

Aircraft taking off or landing at small airports in Europe might soon be guided from towers hundreds of kilometers away.

The technology is one of the innovations being pursued by the European Union to unclog air lanes in a region grappling with high air-traffic-control costs. Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas on Wednesday committed €600 million, or about \$780 million, in funding for the technology element of the EU's Single European Sky program, which aims to eliminate borders for regulating aviation.

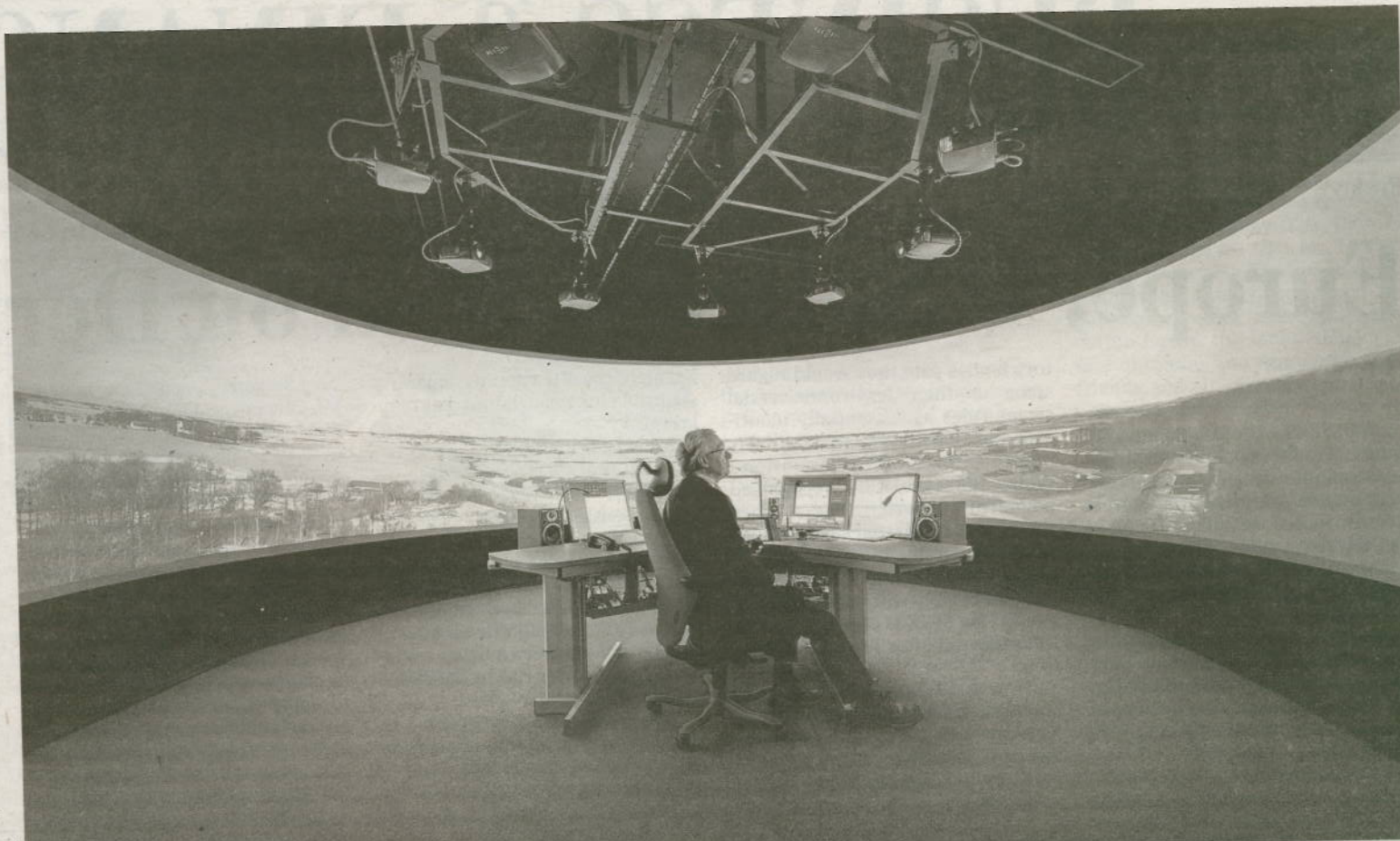
Technology is being tested by Swedish aerospace company Saab AB that allows a single controller to operate as many as five distant airports, with the ability to, for example, switch on runway lighting and deliver crash alerts. Ten cameras and a battery of sensors allow the controller to have a better view of what's going on in the air and on the ground than on-site controllers typically do, Saab said.

A remotely controlled tower costs 50% to 60% less to operate than a manned one without sacrificing safety, Saab Chief Strategy Officer Dan Jangblad said. "Keeping a chair warm 24 hours a day, seven days a week takes six or seven people."

Remote control could be attractive for airports with light traffic—fewer than 150 flights a day—and makes most sense when there are only a few daily arrivals and departures. It isn't suitable for traffic at busy hubs such as London's Heathrow Airport, which had an average of 1,288 daily takeoffs and landings last year, according to Eurocontrol, the umbrella organization for European air-navigation agencies.

"At an airfield where the traffic is light, does it make sense to devote resources 24 hours a day to man a control tower for one daily flight when we have the technology to allow us to ensure the safety of the aircraft remotely?" asks Hervé Breton, a former controller at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport. "Personally, I think it's possible."

Saab operates a low-traffic airport at Örnsköldsvik from a Swedish con-



Saab's remote air-traffic-control system allows a single person to control as many as five distant airports, where cameras and a battery of sensors are installed.

trol tower 145 kilometers away in Sundsvall, in eastern Sweden. The company also is testing a remote system to control traffic at a helicopter base in the distant reaches of northern Norway. A trial in Alice Springs in northern Australia is being operated from Adelaide, 1,500 kilometers away, to test the system in hot and dusty conditions. Trials are also scheduled for midsize German airports at Saarbrücken, Erfurt and Dresden through 2015.

Three or four airports in Sweden are "very excited" about the system, said Erik Backman, head of remote-tower services for Sweden's state-controlled air-navigation services company LFV, which is conducting the trials with Saab. LFV estimates labor cost-savings of as much as 30% over a manned tower.

Many controllers in Europe are worried that the innovation could cause job cuts. French air controllers went on strike last month to protest the latest EU push for the Single European Sky.

The EU's Mr. Kallas said fears about job losses were unfounded. Adding efficiency to air-traffic control would increase flights in Europe, creating jobs, not eliminating them, he said. "We think the time has come to make more decisive action on behalf of Europe's air transport customers and also airlines."

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration also has toyed with the idea of remote-tower systems, though none is in operation. The FAA has said it would have to close 149 of the 516 control towers across the U.S. because of federal budget cuts, boost-

ing the appeal of remote towers.

Dale Wright, director for safety and training at the National Air Traffic Controllers Association in the U.S., said remote-tower technology "is dead center on our radar screen." The association sees possibilities for remote-tower operations at airports without towers of their own, Mr. Wright said. But the group is skeptical about substituting manned towers with cameras and sensors. One drawback is that remote towers might have difficulty picking up small planes, he said. The impact of power outages also is something that needs to be studied closely, he said.

The airport in Beckley, W.Va., which doesn't have a tower, next week will demonstrate another technology—the airport calls it a Syn-

thetic Air Traffic Advisory System—using off-the-shelf electronics to provide automated guidance on traffic and flying conditions for aircraft and their pilots. Adding a remote-tower system would reduce the risks of collisions, said Thomas Cochran, Beckley's airport manager.

LFV and Saab hope the system they are testing will be approved by Swedish authorities by the end of next month and that it can be fully operational by November. That would allow the companies to start marketing the system in Sweden and other countries. LFV operates air-traffic services in Abu Dhabi, where authorities are interested in using a remote-tower system for small airports on islands.

—Daniel Michaels  
contributed to this article.

## Hugo Boss Says China's Luxury Market Is Changing

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products that could be purchased on the day of the show, rather than giving shoppers a glance at the season ahead and then making them wait.

Mr. Lahrs said sales have been softening in China since last year, when Beijing, in an anticorruption effort, banned civil servants from using government funds to purchase luxury goods. He declined to break

out sales by country, saying only that sales in the rest of the year will face pressures but will be stronger than the first half.

"There will be growth, but the growth rates will be fiercely fought for," Mr. Lahrs said.

In September Burberry Group PLC warned that the luxury company's Asia-Pacific sales growth slowed sharply, to 18%, in its fiscal

first quarter—half the pace of 2011. Then-Chief Financial Officer Stacey Cartwright said a decrease in China's typical gift-giving was the cause. "Clearly there's the changing of the guard coming very shortly, and we'll have to see what comes after that," she said.

Many industry officials see the pressure easing in the future, in the belief that the crackdown on gift-

giving by Beijing will be temporary.

Pernod Ricard's managing director of China, Con Constandis, in an interview earlier this year, likened the Chinese government's efforts to scolding loud teenagers at a party. "They'll settle down for a while, but you're not going to stop them," he said.

Even so, some luxury companies, such as Gucci have announced

they are no longer expanding. Gucci said earlier this year that it is slowing the pace of its store openings in the country, where it has 57 stores. A spokeswoman declined to offer more details, saying that Gucci's outlets are in China's most popular shopping locations. The focus is shifting to renovation and refurbishment of existing stores, she said.

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#### Corrections & Amplifications

Germany's Tony Martin won the 11th stage of the Tour de France on Wednesday. A Heard on the Pitch item on Thursday incorrectly said that Dan Martin won the stage. Ireland's Dan Martin won the ninth stage.

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