

Asia Pacific airlines maintain essential services through crisis

While most global airline passenger traffic has halted in recent weeks, this does not mean air traffic has halted. Air connectivity remains critical for transporting important supplies and people such as skilled medical personnel and other essential service providers.

The difficulty lies in closed borders, shutdowns and lockdowns that restrict movements, causing complications for airlines attempting to carry critical goods and people to their destinations. Regulatory assistance is needed, and the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA) is appealing to governments to grant flexibility on relaxing slot constraints, curfews on operating hours as well as by expediting approvals and exempting crew from quarantine requirements where necessary.

Enormous challenges

Airlines the world over are dealing with a near-inconceivable number of challenges right now. Flights operated by airlines based in the Asia Pacific region declined by 93% during the first week of April when compared to traffic levels at the beginning of 2020. While these flights have been cancelled, airlines have been adding ad hoc flights to meet the demands for repatriation flights for stranded customers. To gain necessary clearances for these flights, airlines must work with governments and national regulatory authorities.

At the same time, airlines are having to deal with a large volume of enquiries and requests from travellers due to flight cancellations. Airlines in Asia Pacific are encouraging customers to use online service tools when possible, and they are currently working their way through a backlog of requests, with priority status given to passengers with impending travel dates. In an attempt to be flexible, airlines are offering refunds, open-ended deferrals, flexible change or rerouting options and waiver of change fees, wherever appropriate.

Cargo demand remains

While demand for air cargo declined by 19% globally in March 2020 vs the same period in 2019, the demand continues, especially for significant volumes of pharmaceuticals, medical protective equipment and food supplies. The loss of bellyhold capacity resulting from the extreme decline in passenger flights has caused airlines to increase dedicated freight aircraft. Because many airlines do not have the numbers of cargo planes necessary for this demand, a number of Asian airlines have adapted passenger aircraft to carry cargo in the cabin in addition to the bellyhold.

AAPA Director General Mr. Subhas Menon said: "The current crisis is taking an enormous toll on Asian economies and people's livelihoods across the region. Some 50 million people work in travel and tourism alone within the Asia Pacific region. We recognise and applaud the efforts being made by many governments to offer financial assistance and support to the aviation industry as well as the wider travel and tourism sector."

Mr. Menon added, "The Asia Pacific aviation community is strongly committed to continuing to work closely with governments, public health authorities, and other international bodies to both respond to current challenges, and at the same time begin to make plans for recovery. Aviation has always been a key driver of economic and social development, nowhere more so than in the Asia Pacific region, and will play an important role in the overall recovery effort."