

Asian airline association calls for government collaboration

The Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA) has urged governments to ease “unduly onerous” restrictions on international air travel to re-establish global connectivity with evidence-based measures to safeguard public health.

The association said that more than six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asia Pacific air transport industry was taking initial steps towards restarting international operations by working closely with governments, health authorities and other stakeholders. However, most international flights worldwide continue to be grounded by border closures, and other travel restrictions, even as domestic lockdowns are gradually eased. The economic consequences of such shutdowns are far reaching, AAPA said, with the travel and tourism sectors among the hardest hit.

AAPA said that the publication of guidance material in June by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to anchor coordinated efforts to restart international air travel was “a significant step in the right direction” but progress had been “slow and sporadic”.

It added that while there had been initiatives and discussions about opening up international air corridors, travel bubbles, green lanes or fast channels, such initiatives had so far failed to take off due to their impractical requirements and inherent unscalability to meet the reasonable expectations of the traveling public.

The association noted that measures such as widespread testing and contact tracing, wearing of masks and social distancing were being applied in the context of international air travel, but these needed to be consistent, based on robust risk assessments, and coordinated amongst governments working closely together with airlines, airports and health authorities.

On the subject of quarantine measures, AAPA stated: “Public attitudes towards air travel are evolving as confidence is rebuilt. However, a major obstacle is the widespread imposition of blanket quarantine measures by governments on inbound passengers. This makes any attempt to travel internationally by air extremely daunting, with questionable benefits over the need for quarantines once adequate community testing and contact tracing measures are in place. Furthermore, the unpredictability and changing requirements of such measures only add to the confusion for both airlines and passengers.”

Commenting on the overall aviation situation, AAPA Director General Subhas Menon said: “International isolation is not a sustainable long-term solution for any government given the importance of travel and trade in supporting global economic and social activity. After more than six months, the lack of a framework encompassing harmonized or mutually recognized measures that are pragmatic, consistent and based on robust risk assessment, will not only irretrievably hurt the region's airlines, but more importantly, negatively impact the region's tourism and trade prospects, as well as millions of livelihoods. We must take a pragmatic approach to restarting flights gradually while mitigating risks to restore confidence and trust in the reliability of everyday air travel.”

He added: “Quarantine measures should only be applied selectively for passengers originating from higher risk locations. Another critical area for cooperation is reaching a common understanding on the use of COVID-19 testing as a further risk mitigation measure in screening international passengers, based on mutual acceptance.”

Menon concluded: “Restoring international air connectivity is a shared challenge. We are calling on all

governments to work cooperatively to re-establish global connectivity whilst maintaining appropriate measures to safeguard public health. Asia Pacific airlines remain fully committed to working closely with governments and other industry stakeholders to progressively restore international air links in a safe and secure manner, serving the needs of the traveling public and enabling the industry to continue to fulfil its key role in supporting wider global economic recovery."