

04/10/1997

MAS did well to clear backlog of domestic flight passengers

Sufi Yusof

A TOTAL of 574 flight cancellations, 203 delays, 24 diversions and 32 forced overflights within two weeks, is a heavy price for any airline to pay as far as passengers' confidence is concerned.

In fact in this day and age of high technology equipment used in airline operations, such a miserable record is unthinkable.

But yet these were the figures that greeted Malaysia Airlines officials after two months of choking haze which blanketed most parts of the peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak.

"On paper those figures look high, but the fact that we managed to clear all backlog domestic passengers within two days is a record by itself," said Malaysia Airlines regional operations chief pilot Captain Nik Huzlan Nik Hussein when interviewed yesterday.

"We were lucky as the worst period only lasted for two weeks or else we would have had more cancellations," he said.

With most local airports closed due to low-visibility, passengers, whose flights were cancelled, were left stranded until the situation improved.

This large number of passengers warranted the use of larger airplanes to replace the otherwise narrow-body, single-aisle, airplanes used on domestic routes.

A number of passengers also called the New Straits Times, not to complain about the haze, but to point out the fact that modern jetliners with "all weather capability" surely could rely on computers to land without the pilot actually having to see the ground.

One caller, who claimed that he missed an important appointment because his flight was cancelled, said in Europe airplanes, including those from Malaysia Airlines, could land in fog thicker than the haze.

Nik Huzlan agrees. "In fact with the technology available in Malaysia Airlines' planes now, pilots don't have to land manually. Everything can be done automatically," said Huzlan.

"And our crew are qualified to land blind (no visual assistance). Though we do not practise that here, such capability come in handy overseas," he said.

But, he added, though the airplanes had such advanced technology, ground equipment at airports must be upgraded correspondingly and at present no airport in the country had such capability.

"From the pilots' point of view, our airports have improved tremendously. The Instrument Landing System (to aid aircraft landing) helped ease the situation during the haze."

"We would have had a lot more problems without it," said Nik Huzlan. The ILS works on certain frequency and communicates with airplane to guide it into a specified landing path.

However, it has its limitations and airline pilots must adhere to safety regulations specified by the Department of Civil Aviation.

According to Nik Huzlan, to land blind, some of the more basic requirements an airport needs would be to lengthen runways, having fail-safe equipment which were highly accurate to aid airplanes land apart from runway lighting of certain category.

"The only airport which has some of these equipment is the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang. But, even there we cannot land blind," he said.

He added powerful runway lights helped a Malaysia Airlines 747 achieve

the first landing at the KLIA on Sept 15 witnessed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during thick haze.

As equipment to enable airplanes to land blind were expensive, the question remains whether it is needed or not.

"Haze is an occasional phenomenon and to install such expensive equipment would probably not justify the need," he added.

An industry observer said it would only serve to increase airport taxes as well as landing and parking charges to airlines.

"It would be good enough if we can improve on calibration to ensure that the ILS at our airports and other navigational aid systems are accurate," he said.

"Though the Government should consider nothing but the best for the new KLIA, it should be prudent, especially now with the high exchange rate, to ensure KLIA's competitiveness remains without compromising safety."

(END)