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First-day disarray at KLIA (HL)

SEPANG, Tues. - Most flights were delayed today due to a system breakdown as the Kuala Lumpur International Airport strove to cope with teething problems on the first day of commercial operations.

Complications were apparent from about 6.30am when passengers arriving for their flights and found themselves stuck in long queues at the check-in counters.

The passenger check-in processing system broke down about 6.30am and was back online only about four hours later. Passengers had to be checked in manually. There were problems also with baggage handling, ticketing and gate allocation.

The PCPS is one of the sub-systems of the Total Airport Management System, the sophisticated interface that links all computer-based systems at KLIA and forms the heart of its operations.

KLIA's first flight, MH1432 bound for Langkawi at 7am with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali on board, took off 25 minutes late as several passengers arrived late.

Dr Mahathir, who returned to the KLIA in the evening, was briefed by Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, Malaysia Airlines chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli and Malaysia Airport Berhad officials.

Speaking to reporters later, Dr Mahathir attributed the problems to a breakdown in lines of communications, insufficient signage and mechanical failure in baggage handling.

Asked if he was confident the problems would be resolved, he said he was. "I won't say within the next few hours ... but there were other new airports, which when they opened, could not function at all."

Arriving passengers reported that their planes had flown in a holding pattern over the airport for some time before landing, while further delays were caused by the baggage handling system.

The first international passengers from a Cairo flight were seen wandering in search of the right baggage reclaim carousel. Only one flight information display terminal was working in the area.

Arriving passengers were also disoriented by the lack of signages to direct them to the limousine services. An officer from the Entrepreneur Development Ministry at the arrival hall directed them to the counter.

Many first-class passengers, however, were enthusiastic in their praise and said they had no problems retrieving baggage or clearing Customs and immigration.

Although Malaysia Airports had trained about 200 of its staff to be "ambassadors", or volunteers to help passengers with inquiries, only a few were to be seen in the first few hours.

Passengers seeking help elsewhere went to the Passenger Assistance Centre on the third floor, but it was unmanned.

Spotted later, its manager Sharudin Majid said he was new on the job and had never attended a trial run at KLIA. Instead, he had been given a brief run-down this morning by his sole staff who was helping passengers elsewhere.

Earlier this morning, Malaysia Airport managing director Datuk Khairuddin Ibrahim said the situation was under control. "This is the first day of the new airport. There are bound to be problems."

The airport was opened on Saturday replacing the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah

Airport in Subang.
* REPORTS ON P4 & P6

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