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New airport runs into several hitches on opening day

THE newly-opened RM9 billion KL International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang ran into several hitches yesterday, its first day of commercial operations.

Apparently there had been a breakdown in communication lines and baggage handling equipment was not working. The failure of passenger-check-in-processing-systems (PCPs) and inadequate signages all contributed to the confusion.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, on his return to the KLIA in the evening, was briefed on the problems by Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, Malaysia Airlines executive chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli and Malaysia Airports Bhd officials.

The Prime Minister had taken the inaugural domestic flight to Langkawi at 7.25am yesterday.

Speaking to reporters after the briefing, Dr Mahathir said the communications breakdown had resulted in some departments not being able to be in contact with one another and this had caused some departure delays and some aircraft not being supplied with meals.

Dr Mahathir said as the airport is huge, some people did not know where their gates were and where they were supposed to enter or exit.

He said it had been pointed out earlier that the signages were insufficient and airport management had identified where more signs were needed.

As for the mechanical failure regarding luggage, Dr Mahathir said "they (the airport staff) could not sort the luggage and that was being handled by the relevant authorities".

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

Dr Mahathir said although there were hitches, he was told planes were able to land and take off.

"There is no problem with the control tower and I think that is a very good thing."

Asked if there was a back-up system for communications, he said there should be one but that the airport staff had used handphones to communicate.

On whether it could be said that there were no serious complications on the first day of commercial operations, Dr Mahathir said: "Not very serious complications.

"I wish there had been no complications but I had all along suspected that there would be. So when I was told there was a call from Tan Sri Tajudin, I knew there must be something ... sure enough he told me there is a lot of confusion here. I was in Langkawi and decided to come back earlier."

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik later told reporters that angry passengers came to him to complain about the problems they encountered such as having to wait some three to four hours for baggage.

He said various agencies are making every effort to overcome the problems.

"On behalf of the ministry, I would like to apologise to the passengers for the inconvenience caused," he said.

Early yesterday, aircraft had to circle for up to an hour to land and on

touching down faced the prospects of no parking apron allotment.

Many departing passengers encountered a breakdown of the PCPs and became unsure of which rows to check in for flights.

Some passengers were even issued handwritten boarding passes.

Business Times understands, however, that flight information display systems (FIDS) were working well.

The PCPs, on the converse, had been down for most of the morning and only towards the afternoon, were some found to be working.

FIDS inform passengers which row to check in at, while the PCPs provide further information, such as the flight number. Without this vital information, passengers do not know where to check in.

The first international arrival, Mr R. Filpe, who did not have any check-in baggage, said he cleared immigration and Customs within ten minutes.

"It was a breeze. There was no queue," the German said, adding that he was impressed with the airport.

This was not true for passengers from Cairo who had landed at 7.45am and were still waiting for their luggage at 11am.

Transportation also presented problems. The queue for airport limousines snaked a few hundred passengers long; some had to wait for up to an hour for transport.

Some Malaysia Airlines officials alleged they were unable to serve first class passengers at the Malaysia Airlines Golden Lounge as their equipment had been prevented from entering the airport.

There were also parking problems as the automatic pay machines were not functioning, resulting in long queues there too.

When asked for comments, Malaysia Airports managing director, Datuk Khairuddin Ibrahim, admitted there were some problems, but insisted it was "normal for the first day of operations".

He added that a post-mortem will be conducted later in the day.

Malaysia Airlines was unable to disclose the number of flights delayed.

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