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Soaring task of matching KLIA's form with substance

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AN AIR traveller flying in from Changi International Airport, touted the best airport in the world, would still be impressed with the RM9 billion KL International Airport.

After a three-hour wait for his baggage last Tuesday, however, the traveller concluded that while KLIA could match the form of its Singapore rival quite easily, it would need time to match it in terms of substance.

For on that Tuesday, KLIA's first day of operations, the promised substance of one of the most modern airports this side of the Suez was sorely missing.

It was a national letdown as it was a day the country was supposed to show off its own state-of-the-art airport to the world; it was a chance to make a statement that despite the economic gloom enveloping the region, there are still things Malaysians can look up to with pride.

After the grand opening by the King last Saturday, officials were looking forward to the airport's first day of commercial operations on Tuesday.

Teething problems were expected and would have been forgotten immediately. But a breakdown in the airport's Total Airport Management System (TAMS), the sophisticated interface that links all the computers at the KLIA, is hardly a minor glitch.

As a result of the breakdown, most flights were delayed and their passengers stranded. There were long waits for luggage and long queues at check-in counters that were being run manually due to the computer breakdown.

Not all the problems, however, were due to the computer glitch. There was a bumper-to-bumper congestion to get out of the car park, people walking around in circles trying to guess where they could get a cab, travellers complaining that they were disoriented because of the lack of signages, and officials who were not red-faced with embarrassment but confused about what they were supposed to do.

It was an inauspicious start for KLIA.

Even KLIA's first flight - a Malaysia Airlines service to Langkawi which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad boarded and scheduled to take-off at 7am - was delayed by 25 minutes as several passengers arrived late.

Dr Mahathir, who returned to the airport in the afternoon to investigate the problems, said the computer problems were "not very serious complications" and steps were being taken to rectify the situation.

If it's of any consolation, the KLIA is not the first to face such a hitch. Denver's US\$3 billion airport baggage handling facility failed when the airport opened in 1995.

And only last month, flights around Newark Airport in the US were disrupted when the computers that handle flights around Newark crashed. Federal Aviation Authority officials were trying to fix a glitch in the computer system when it jammed.

But did Malaysia Airports anticipate the likelihood of a similar problem happening to the KLIA?

The KLIA's Total Airport Management System has been touted as about the most sophisticated of all airport TAMS this side of the Suez. What happened to the back-up system to address the breakdowns in the passenger check-in processing system, baggage handling system, and ticketing and

gate allocation? Isn't there a back-up system for such an important part of the airport operations?

Why didn't the back-up system work immediately after the fault was detected?

The authorities may want to downplay the chaotic situation at the KLIA airport. But that is not how the foreign media have been playing up the stories on the airport's first day of disarray.

This is most unfortunate, especially since so much money has been spent to ensure that everything goes well. The Transport Ministry, Malaysia Airports and the KLIA tenants, including Malaysia Airlines, had raised such high expectations for the airport.

Tuesday's fiasco will not take anything away from the KLIA as an airport that is out to bowl over the user. That is, as long as the same computer glitch does not recur. Travellers flying in from other countries will continue to be impressed by the architecture and infrastructure of this modern airport.

But now KLIA does have so much more to do to live up to expectations, and prove that it has the substance to match its impressive form.

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