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Need for KLIA to develop more connections in the region

Eirmalasare Bani

GETTING more airlines to fly to Kuala Lumpur, which in turn can make the KL International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang a regional hub, is just like looking at another chicken and egg situation, says Northwest Airlines general manager for Singapore and Malaysia Yeoh Hock Thye.

He said it is most important for airlines flying into KLIA to have more connections to major and secondary points in the region.

However, to achieve that, KLIA must first improve the load factor, which can only be done if more airlines fly into Kuala Lumpur.

"Compared to Kuala Lumpur, passengers obviously prefer Singapore, Bangkok or Hong Kong because they can have the choice of more flights and connections," said Singapore-based Yeoh.

He was commenting on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that the Government will meet the carriers to see how it can attract them to increase their flights into KLIA.

Yeoh said airlines fly more to Singapore's Changi rather than KLIA because it has more flights to Jakarta, Bangkok, Surabaya, Phuket and Koh Samui which are "the" regional points for South-East Asia.

"The role of a hub is that it should be able to feed passengers into the airlines. In a hub concept, airlines do not expect all their passengers to come from the country itself. They should be able to pick up passengers from other points as well."

He added that airlines should also have more ability to feed traffic and not depend on the country alone.

"For example, Northwest does not fly to Chiangmai, Medan or Surabaya, but there are passengers from the US who obviously want to go to these secondary points."

Northwest Airlines is currently the only US carrier to fly to Malaysia.

On the facility and services offered by KLIA, Yeoh said that like any other airport in the world, there is "always room for improvement".

"The previous international airport in Subang does not have the right infrastructure nor the capability to handle huge traffic.

"KLIA now has the capability but the question is, do you have enough linkages with other points... You cannot build a hub overnight and it takes a lot of money to build one," he said.

Yeoh also said that KLIA is facing more competition across the region as more countries are upgrading their airport facilities, such as South Korea which opened the new Incheon International Airport recently, and Tokyo which is building a second runway for its Narita International Airport.

Meanwhile, the country manager of a foreign airlines based at KLIA claimed that the Sepang airport lacks a certain "warmth", which can be felt in other regional airports such as that of Bangkok and Changi.

"Some of the staff at the check-in counter do not even have a minimum service standard that we expect from such an international standard airport. They try not to talk to you sometimes, such as when you need to ask for directions.

"These people should have more pride in their work. They should realise that every part of the work is important. It does not matter if you are a cleaner or an administration clerk. Without them, a lot of things will not happen," he said.

He also claimed that the number of baggage missing at KLIA is higher than at the other airports and that it takes a long time for passengers to

retrieve their luggage.

"Walking from the arrival hall and the immigration process may take about half an hour during peak hours, but KLIA is under-utilised so the whole thing should take about 20 minutes; but when they reach the baggage retrieval area, they still have to wait for their bags."

He also said response from Malaysia Airports Bhd officials on the issue is not quite acceptable.

"Rather than finding a solution for the problem, they are asking customers to accept this as the way it is, which is truly unacceptable," he said, adding that these are some of the small things which have escaped attention but matter to passengers.

KLIA manager Malaysia Airports (Sepang) Sdn Bhd acknowledged that there is room for improvement as far as service counters and ground services are concerned.

"We are equally concerned about such weaknesses as it will create a negative image for KLIA.

"Since there are many service providers at this airport, such as the airlines, government departments, concessionaires and airport operator, it is very important for these people or agencies to work together as a team.

"Everybody must be committed to provide best services to their customers and realise that their lackadaisical attitude will expose KLIA to negative publicity which we are trying so hard to avoid," Malaysia Airports Sepang general manager Abdul Hamid Mohd Ali said in a statement to Business Times.

He said KLIA is organising an awareness campaign on customer services in June for all airport staff from both the public and private sector.

On pilferage cases, he said the number is decreasing but efforts to overcome the problem will continue. Last month, there were 32 cases reported for Malaysia Airlines flights and zero by the foreign airlines.

The late baggage delivery is one of the areas that most need to be improved at the airport, Abdul Hamid said, adding that it has been brought up to the KLIA hubbing committee for discussion and further action.

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