

Open skies: 'Malaysia lose, Singapore win'?

MAS MD says early move will give Republic the edge

KUALA LUMPUR — Just two days after the Malaysian Transport Minister offered a glimmer of hope that cheaper air fares between Malaysia and Singapore may come sooner rather than later, the country's national carrier has made it clear that it is against the idea.

Instead, Malaysia Airlines' (MAS) managing director Idris Jala warned it will be a "Malaysia lose, Singapore win" situation if plans to liberalise air services between the two neighbours are accelerated, reports said yesterday.

The flag carrier is worried that opening up the lucrative Malaysia-Singapore route by the end of next year — instead of 2009 as scheduled — could hurt its business turnaround plan, the *New Straits Times* said.

"The liberalisation of air travel should not be brought forward, even for limited flights. We have agreed on the timeline and it is important to keep it," Mr Idris told reporters on Wednesday.

The Asean Open Sky Policy, in which member-countries are to open up air services between their capitals, is due to take off in 2009. Since last year, both Malaysia and Singapore have been in talks on liberalising their air spaces to further boost travel and tourism between the countries.

On Monday, Transport Minister Chan Kong Choy said the Malaysian government was keen to establish a limited open-skies arrangement with Singapore to allow budget airlines from both countries to fly between

Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

"We are prepared to look at it, as it is not a total liberalisation of the Asean aviation route map," he said.

A 34-year-old air services agreement between the two countries has allowed MAS and Singapore Airlines (SIA) to dominate the highly lucrative Singapore-Kuala Lumpur route, with more than 200 flights a week, or 85 per cent of the market.

Travellers now have to pay more than \$400 for a return ticket, including all taxes and surcharges, for the 30-minute flight between the two cities. Tickets to cities such as Bangkok, which is up to two hours away, can be purchased for less than half the amount.

If the air corridor is opened up, it will vastly benefit Singapore's budget airline Tiger Airways and Malaysia's cut-price carrier AirAsia, which have both asked for the right to fly the route, Asia's fourth-busiest, reported AP.

The Star said Mr Idris warned such a move would benefit Singapore more than Malaysia. "Singapore would be the winner as the local airlines are not ready to operate in a fully liberalised environment. We need more time."

But some analysts whom TODAY spoke to disagreed. "It is unclear how Singapore will be the absolute victor when AirAsia would also get access to Changi," said Mr Shukor Yusof, an analyst with Standard & Poor's Equity Research.

On whether opposition from MAS will delay the liberalisation plans, analysts believe each government will ultimately decide on what is best for its country, assessing factors such as the impact on tourism, air carriers and airports.

counted for, the NLB will formalise a collective stocktaking policy.

On the upside, the AGO reported that the number of late payments made by the Government to service providers and suppliers had dropped sharply, from 161 late invoices in the previous fiscal year to 56 for 2006/2007.

However, test checks by the AGO also found cases where government officers had asked suppliers to extend credit terms or to change invoice dates, resulting in the number of late payments not being accurately reflected.

Across nine ministries, 155 invoices were found to have their credit terms extended — one by more than two years. In seven ministries, 97 invoices had dates recorded in the Payment System that did not match the ones on the invoices.

Calling the actions "unfair", the AGO called on ministries to take measures to detect and deter "wilful" actions by officers.



WE'LL LOSE: Mr Idris believes Malaysia's airlines aren't ready for a liberalised industry.

BLUOMBERG

Foreign students: Here's a clearer picture

Ministry clarifies there are more in local varsities than was stated in Parliament

LEE U-WEN
u-wen@mediacorp.com.sg

THE Ministry of Education (MOE) has come out to clarify a statement made by one of its ministers about the number of foreigners granted places in a Singapore university this year.

In Parliament on Tuesday, Minister of State for Education Gan Kim Yong had said that of the nearly 23,000 foreign students who had applied to the three local universities, just 987 (4.3 per cent) were successful. He gave this figure in comparison to the rate for local students, of which 28,000 applied and nearly half were offered places.

But as it turns out now, the number was delivered out of context.

In a letter to the media yesterday, MOE's director of higher education Perry Lim explained that this 4.3 per cent figure only referred to foreign students who had studied at the local polytechnics or junior colleges in Singapore.

When lumped together with those foreign students with foreign qualifications, the total number of places offered a local university spot is 4,218 — or 18 per cent — of all applicants.

Mr Lim said that, in planning for university places each year, the MOE and the three local universities — the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University — would first decide on the number of publicly subsidised places for local students.

This year, such places were provided

WHAT THE NUMBERS MEAN

4,218 (18 PER CENT)
The total number of successful foreign applicants to local universities, including those who applied from overseas.

987 (4.3 PER CENT)
Successful foreign applicants with local A-level and/or polytechnic qualifications.

for 23.5 per cent of the entire birth cohort, up from 20.8 per cent in 2000. The target is to hit 25 per cent by 2010, said MOE.

"Consideration is then given to the admission of foreign students, which is limited to 20 per cent of the total student population. In practice, the universities admit fewer foreign students in courses where there is strong demand from Singaporeans and more in other courses," he said.

Many TODAY readers wrote in after the original report on the "987" figure was published on Wednesday, as did others who expressed surprise on online forums.

Said Mr Edmund Lim, who graduated from NUS three years ago: "When I first saw that number for the foreign student intake this year, it was quite obvious to me that it was wrong. Just go down to the campus and anyone can see that the number could never be that low."

Responding to queries from TODAY on foreign student enrolment trends, an MOE spokesperson said the proportion of foreign students have been "consistent" over the past few years, at about 20 per cent of the universities' enrolment.

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Aids testing

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Since December 2004, pregnant women have been subjected to opt-out HIV tests as part of standard antenatal screening here. Only one case of mother-to-child transmission has occurred, and that was because the mother refused her HIV test until very late in her pregnancy, according to the MOH.

Last year, Singapore experienced a record high of 357 new HIV-positive cases.

Making testing compulsory — even for small high-risk groups — could pose some implementation problems, said the deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health, Dr Lam Pin Min.

"It's hard to identify persons in the high-risk groups unless they declare it themselves," he said. "It also makes it very difficult to draw a line between whether you visit sex workers or are sexually liberal or promiscuous."

"So, if you make it a law to self-declare, does it mean that you're breaking the law

These undiagnosed infected are walking time bombs.

— Focus on the Family director Tan Thuan Seng

Mandatory testing of any group only serves to stigmatise, isolate and deepen discrimination.

— Heat Consultants programme director Benedict Jacob-Thambiah

if you're in one category or the other?"

Those whom TODAY spoke to were all in favour of better public education, particularly as the HIV/Aids situation here is not seen as dire.

"I don't think the situation has come to the point where there is a real epidemic that requires an intrusion into private lives," said Aids Business Alliance chairman Zulkifli. "We always try to persuade and cajole people, and, in most cases, they respond."

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