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COVID-19 / Restarting International Air Travel

Association of Asia Pacific Airlines

(Reg.No. 587)

Level 27-1, Menara Prestige

1 Jalan Pinang

50450 Kuala Lumpur

MALAYSIA

Tel +603 2162 1888

Fax +603 2162 6888

www.aapairlines.org

AAPA Calls for Collaboration between Governments for Aviation Recovery

Onerous restrictions on travel threaten long-lasting damage to economy and livelihoods

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia – The Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA) urged governments to ease unduly onerous restrictions on international air travel to re-establish global connectivity with evidence-based measures to safeguard public health.

More than six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asia Pacific air transport industry is taking initial steps towards restarting international operations by working closely with governments, health authorities and other stakeholders. However, most international flights worldwide continue to be grounded by border closures, and other travel restrictions, even as domestic lockdowns are gradually eased. The economic consequences of such shutdowns are far reaching, with the travel and tourism sectors amongst the hardest hit. Airline failures and major job losses have been announced within the industry, and could become more widespread as the crisis becomes prolonged. Hopes that international air travel would gradually return in the second half of 2020 now seem premature as governments direct attention and resources to fighting resurgent domestic infections.

Welcomed by industry, the publication of guidance material in June by the Council Aviation Recovery Taskforce (CART) of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) to anchor coordinated efforts to restart international air travel, was a significant step in the right direction. However, progress has been slow and sporadic on this front. Whilst there have been initiatives and discussions about opening up international air corridors, travel bubbles, green lanes or fast channels, such initiatives have so far failed to take off due to their impractical requirements and inherent unscalability to meet the reasonable expectations of the travelling public.

Good progress is being made on widespread testing and contact tracing, wearing of masks and social distancing, which are now progressively being implemented by governments across the world. Such measures are also being applied in the context of international air travel, but these need to be consistent, based on robust risk assessments, and coordinated amongst governments working closely together with airlines, airports and health authorities.

Public attitudes towards air travel are evolving as confidence is rebuilt. However, a major obstacle is the widespread imposition of blanket quarantine measures by governments on inbound passengers. This makes any attempt to travel internationally by air extremely daunting, with questionable benefits over the need for quarantines once adequate community testing and contact tracing measures are in place. Furthermore, the unpredictability and changing requirements of such measures only add to the confusion for both airlines and passengers.

Commenting on the situation, Mr. Subhas Menon, AAPA Director General said, “International isolation is not a sustainable long term solution for any government given the importance of travel and trade in supporting global economic and social activity. After more than six months, the lack of a framework encompassing harmonized or mutually recognized measures that are pragmatic, consistent and based on robust risk assessment, will not only irretrievably hurt the region’s airlines, but more importantly, negatively impact the region’s tourism and trade prospects, as well as millions of livelihoods. We must take a pragmatic approach to restarting flights gradually while mitigating risks to restore confidence and trust in the reliability of everyday air travel.”

Mr. Menon added, “Quarantine measures should only be applied selectively for passengers originating from higher risk locations. Another critical area for cooperation is reaching a common understanding on the use of COVID-19 testing as a further risk mitigation measure in screening international passengers, based on mutual acceptance.”

Mr. Menon concluded, “Restoring international air connectivity is a shared challenge. We are calling on all governments to work cooperatively to re-establish global connectivity whilst maintaining appropriate measures to safeguard public health. Asia Pacific airlines remain fully committed to working closely with governments and other industry stakeholders to progressively restore international air links in a safe and secure manner, serving the needs of the travelling public and enabling the industry to continue to fulfil its key role in supporting wider global economic recovery.”

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Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA)

The AAPA is the trade association for scheduled international airlines based in the Asia-Pacific region. The AAPA permanent secretariat is headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia with international representation in Brussels and Washington, D.C. Collectively, the region's airlines carry 1,623 million passengers and 23 million tonnes of cargo, representing over one-third of global passenger and air cargo traffic, and thus play a leading role in the ongoing development of global aviation.

For further information, please contact:

Office of the Director General

Tel +603 2162 1888 Fax +603 2162 6888

Email: odg@aapa.org.my

Website: www.aapairlines.org

Twitter: [@aapairlines](https://twitter.com/aapairlines)