

New Changi rule irks private flight operators

Flexibility lost, having to apply for slots and parking bays earlier, avoiding peak periods

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(Singapore)

CHANGI Airport's decision to force all non-scheduled flights to apply for slots is causing consternation among charter and private flight operators.

Up until the end of last year, non-scheduled flights could land and take-off from Changi by filing a flight plan just hours earlier.

But this changed on Jan 1. All non-scheduled operators are now required to apply for both slots and parking bays at Changi Airport. These rules don't apply to emergency, humanitarian and diplomatic flights.

Several operators BT spoke to expressed disappointment with the changes, though most understood that heavy traffic and congestion could be the main reason for the change.

'Most major airports have these kinds of rules for unscheduled flights, and Changi is quite congested now on the air-side,' said Prithpal Singh, who operates Executive Jets Asia. 'But at the same time, private jet operators cannot be expected to operate like scheduled flights. The compromise could be to allocate certain slots during off-peak periods for non-scheduled flights.'

But others are clearly displeased.

One private jet and charter operator, MyJet Asia, related how it had to delay a flight from Bangkok to Singapore by a day because of the unavailability of a desired slot.

'We have lost the flexibility which we used to enjoy,' lamented Ravi Logan, CEO of MyJet. 'Why would anyone want to pay tens of thousands of dollars to fly private jets if they have to wait for a slot just like any other scheduled flight?'

Operators are also irked by the fact that Changi airport is restricting non-scheduled flights into the airport during the peak hours of 11.05am to 12 noon, 4.05-6pm and 9.05-11.00pm for arrivals, and 6.05-11.00am and 8.05-10.00 pm for departures.

Both airport operator Changi Airport Group (CAG) and regulator Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) confirmed the changes in rules.

But CAG said it was merely implementing rules introduced and enforced by CAAS.

In its notice to operators, CAG said the rules would allow the airport 'to better optimise our resources to ensure the continued efficiency of aircraft operations, given the increase in traffic movement over the years'.

It also urged operators not to apply for slots during peak periods.

When contacted, CAAS suggested the rules were not uncommon for major airports.

'Changi Airport is a slot-coordinated airport,' responded a CAAS spokesman to BT's queries. 'Slot coordination for all operations, scheduled and non-scheduled, is a common practice at all major air hubs. With Changi Airport's traffic reaching a new high in 2011, the requirement to apply for and be allocated slots has been extended to non-scheduled flight operations from Jan 1, 2012. This is to ensure the continued efficiency of aircraft operations at Changi Airport.'

Indeed, steadily rising traffic and resulting congestion on the air-side at Changi has peaked over the past year with flights sometimes being held back for over half-an-hour. There have also been reports of delayed arriving flights being diverted to neighbouring airports.

More than 100 airlines fly into and out of Changi, and the airlines averaged 25,000 flight movements a month in 2011. Of these, 2 per cent were unscheduled. On average, Changi handles 870 flights a day. During the 4-6pm peak hours alone, Changi handles over 120 flights.

While Seletar Airport is being developed for private and business jets, many operators point to the acute shortage of parking bays there, leading to a maximum parking time of five hours. Operators also say that fuel at Seletar is significantly more expensive than at Changi.

Some operators like EJA, for example, have already moved five jets to Senai in Johor, which offers a lower cost base for private jets. Mr Singh sees more operators doing the same.

'I think, ultimately Senai will emerge as an attractive alternative for non-scheduled operators, especially with the rapid development of the Iskandar area and Singapore's involvement there,' he said.

BT understands a team from CAAS/CAG is scheduled to visit Senai early next month to discuss potential areas of cooperation in business-general aviation.

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