

AoT airport expansion plan on hold

Suvarnabhumi revamp too costly, panel says

AMORNRAT MAHITTHIROOK

Suvarnabhumi airport expansion plans were put on hold yesterday after the junta's state budget monitoring and scrutinising committee demanded Airports of Thailand Plc review them.

Committee head, Lt Gen Anantaporn Kanchanarat, announced last month the panel would examine the planned second phase of Suvarnabhumi airport's expansion.

He later said the estimated 60 billion baht project cost was too expensive, despite the upgrade being necessary.

AoT chief, Makin Petplai, said yesterday the AoT is ready to comply with the committee's wishes.

The AoT would make changes to construction layouts if asked, he said, adding that emphasis would be given to transparency.

The project will be put on hold even though bidding by consultancy companies on the project is under way, he said.

"The AoT is still moving ahead with improvements to Don Mueang airport's capacity to accommodate a surge in the number of passengers there," Mr Makin said.

The upgrade to Don Mueang airport's Terminal 2 is expected to be completed by October this year. This will allow the airport to handle 30 million passengers a year, up from 18 million at present, he said.

The number of passengers passing through Suvarnabhumi airport is now more than 51 million people each year, far more than its 45 million capacity, Mr Makin said.

The second expansion phase at Suvarnabhumi was supposed to start in December this year and would be completed by the end of 2016 or early 2017, he said. The expansion would boost airport capacity to handle up to 60 million passengers per year.

An AoT source said expansion needs to begin by the end of next year at the latest because the number of passengers and flights keeps rising each year.

The upgrade at Don Mueang's Terminal 2 could help alleviate problems to some extent as some flights can be directed there, the source said.

Referring to estimated numbers of passengers using AoT airports nationwide, Mr Makin said passenger numbers could fall by 7% in the third quarter, but numbers are expected to pick up in the fourth quarter.

Passengers passing through AoT airports are expected to grow 2-3% this year, compared with last year's jump of 9.5%, he said.

Mr Makin said the AoT will spend 1.3 billion baht of the 2015 fiscal budget on improving security systems at Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, Phuket, Hat Yai, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai's Mae Fah Luang airports to cope with the increasing risks posed by terrorism, natural disasters and contagious diseases.

More airport staff and technologically advanced equipment will be brought to screen passengers and vehicles.

More than 60% of the funding will be set aside for Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, Phuket and Hat Yai airports as they have larger numbers of passengers, he said.

Contingency plans for possible tsunamis will be drawn up at Phuket airport, while others for earthquakes will be soon be in place at Chiang Mai and Mae Fah Luang airports.

Mr Makin said the Chiang Rai quakes hit visitors at Mae Fah Luang airport, with passengers falling 5-6% from a previous expansion of 12%.

Twin bomb blasts in Hat Yai in early May caused an 8% drop in the number of passengers using the southern airport from 6% growth recorded earlier.

Every three months, the AoT and agencies such as the Department of Disease Control, the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation and the international anti-terrorism centre, will hold workshops to improve contingency plans to deal with potential threats, Mr Makin said.