

Travel corridors for vaccinated passengers could open in 2nd half of 2021: Ong Ye Kung



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SINGAPORE - Bilateral travel corridors for vaccinated passengers from places with low to moderate infection rates may well happen in the second half of this year, said Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung on Friday (March 12) as Singapore continues to explore ways to open up its borders and revive air travel.

In an interview with Money FM 89.3, Mr Ong said stay-home notices and other quarantine measures will kill travel. Singapore, he added, needs to find ways to get rid of such requirements, a point he also made last week during the debate on his ministry's budget.

"Nobody is going to come to Singapore and stay for 14 days," he told radio DJ Elliott Danker.

While vaccinations are changing the game, this needs to work in tandem with other measures such as testing, movement restrictions and identifying countries that are "safe" and have successfully controlled the virus, Mr Ong said.

For example, Singapore could open up to travellers from places with moderate Covid-19 infection rates but have ongoing vaccination programmes.

"(Combine that) with testing, and you can possibly open up a safe travel corridor," he added.

On air travel bubbles, Mr Ong said such arrangements require reciprocity, noting that Singapore has already opened its borders unilaterally to travellers from countries and territories that have a handle on the virus, such as Australia, New Zealand and China, and this has not led to community infections here.

"Unfortunately, we are the only safe place in the world that is opening up to others like that," Mr Ong said.

"If only others start to do it, then we'll have a bubble, you have reciprocity, you can start to travel. And I hope some time this year we can do that."

Singapore's air travel bubble with Hong Kong, which was supposed to begin last November, remains on ice, as the city saw yet another flare-up in cases this week.

Mr Ong said Singapore is still in a "crisis situation", noting that the passenger volume at Changi Airport is only at 2.6 per cent of the levels seen before the Covid-19 pandemic.

He said he shared the same view as International Air Transport Association (Iata) director Alexandre de Juniac, who told The Straits Times this week that personal and leisure travel will return from the second half of this year.

However, Mr Ong cautioned that this was neither an estimate nor a prediction but "a guess", and reiterated that it was unrealistic to expect the aviation sector here to have a "V-shaped" recovery.

He said the virus "wants to dominate the world".

"It will mutate, it transmits without symptoms, and you don't know what curveballs (it) will throw us next.

"(But) many countries and places have a handle on the issue, not just solely based on vaccination, but also testing, social distancing, masks, and different methods... I think all these different measures, plus vaccination, are going to have an impact.

"We'll get better at it. So I think this is the basis from which we feel there should be some recovery."

When asked if there is sufficient manpower in the aviation sector to bounce back, following several retrenchment exercises last year, Mr Ong said these retrenchments made up "a single-digit percentage" of the entire workforce and were mostly shouldered by foreign workers.

"It takes years, a decade even, to train a pilot, and even the air crew. The air traffic controllers, for example, take years of training. So you don't even want to get into that position where you lose talent, you lose your core capability, and when things recover, you can't get them back," he said.

Mr Ong added: "What we have done is to hold on to the manpower as much as we can, with the belief that one day this will recover... The problem you mentioned, it would be because the sector has expanded, things are reviving.

"Then we can attract people. But the key thing is don't lose your core capabilities. Your core staff, you must stay intact."

The Jobs Support Scheme, which has been extended by another six months for the aviation sector, has helped with this.

In his interview with ST earlier this week, Mr de Juniac said Iata is already working with various states to design and plan protocols and road maps for the reopening of borders.

Key among these protocols is Iata's Travel Pass, a mobile health verification app which electronically captures a traveller's vaccination history and Covid-19 test results for cross-border safety checks.

Singapore Airlines has been the first airline to officially announce that it will begin testing the Iata Travel Pass on flights from Singapore to London.

Meanwhile, China also just announced the roll-out of its vaccine passport, while Germany and the United States are poised to introduce their own soon.