

Singapore Professionals Prepare Sochi Airport

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A squad of managers from Singapore is bringing about changes, like increasing the stock of luggage carts, at the airport that will handle throngs of international fans during the Olympics in February.

They are a task force with a mandate to increase comfort at the Sochi Airport, traveling to Russia from time to time on assignment from Changi Airports International after the Singapore-based company joined forces with billionaire Oleg Deripaska.

"We started a program to improve service with support from Singapore from the very moment we signed the agreement," Andrei Yelinson, deputy chief of Deripaska's holding company BasEl, said in an interview.

BasEl, Changi and Sberbank teamed up to develop five southern Russian airports in June last year. Deripaska owns 50 percent plus one share in the joint venture, Basel Aero, which

originally was the sole owner of the assets. Changi took 30 percent.

Several envoys from Changi, whose Singapore airport has often won the title of the world's best, also oversee the Krasnodar air gateway. Changi executive Lek Hi Huak is getting a Russian work permit to lead the efforts as the joint venture's chief operating officer.

In addition to readily available luggage carts, Yelinson credits the foreigners for some other measures on the mission to provide what he described as "seamless service."

They include eliminating lines at check-in, putting up signs and adding staff dedicated to giving passengers directions, equipping waiting areas with a plentiful amount of seats, speeding up the handling of luggage and cutting the turnaround time for planes. A new flexible landing fee concept developed by the Changi team is intended to attract more flights.

The venture is also lining up a deal with Swiss-based Nuance Group to open the Sochi Airport's first duty-free shop in time for the Olympics.

In anticipation of a sharp increase in passenger traffic during the Games, the Sochi Airport will hire more staff, open a VIP terminal, a sports cargo terminal and one temporary passenger terminal, Yelinson said.

On the opening and closing days of the Games, the number of airline customers going through the airport is expected to double to about 29,000 people per day.

"Extraordinary efforts are being made for just those two days," he said in an interview on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Yelinson also announced the government's consent to let the joint venture manage more airports, which are now under state control. He said a commission led by First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov made the decision at a meeting in June.

The venture, where Changi agreed to invest \$200 million and Sberbank \$120 million, will expand in the course of the coming 24 months, Yelinson said. It will either be the sole operator or a partner to manage a few more airports with passenger traffic of at least 500,000 people a year each, he said.

Yelinson did not name the airports, but news reports have identified as possible targets the gateways in Russia's westernmost exclave of Kaliningrad, in the Volga River city of Ufa, Perm in the Ural region and East Siberian Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk. Changi has also said it would be interested in managing Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport.

Yelinson said the government should move quicker in handing over the business to private hands.

"All airports with a commercial promise ... need a transfer to professional operating companies," he said. "The government needs to pull out quicker."

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