

## International

# Temperature checks and masks, the new normal for air travel

## Physical distancing could make flying more expensive: Dubai Airport CEO

**DUBAI:** Temperature screening and face masks will become common sights at airports to mitigate the spread of the new coronavirus but physical distancing could make flying more expensive, the head of Dubai airport said. Around the world, governments, airports and airlines are considering temporary safety measures to restart air travel, including mandatory temperature checks, wearing face masks and keeping passengers apart.

"We are going to have to take whatever measures are necessary to protect the travelling public and our staff," Chief Executive Paul Griffiths told Reuters. Dubai International, one of the world's busiest airports, suspended passenger services in late March as the United Arab Emirates took drastic measures to contain the virus.

The UAE has since allowed some repatriation flights and eased other restrictions in the Gulf state, though it is not clear when normal flights will restart.

Temporary safety measures should be expected as flights resume but Griffiths cautioned physical distancing rules would eventually limit growth as demand rebounds. "We will not be

able to operate at anything close to our original design capacity if we had to maintain social distancing," he said.

Dubai airport, the hub of airline Emirates, was handling Airbus A380s with over 600 passengers before the virus forced the airport to halt flights. Physical distancing could also increase airfares if airlines were restricted to selling fewer tickets in order to keep some seats empty, Griffiths said.

### Fit to travel

But until there was a vaccine, treatment or reliable, quick method to detect the virus, measures that reduce the risk of contagion would need to be enforced, Griffiths said. It is unclear when global travel will recover from the pandemic which has shattered demand and will partially depend on countries lifting their lockdowns. Regaining public confidence in the safety of air travel is seen by the aviation industry as a significant challenge.

Countries that have the spread of the virus under control and agree to reopen their borders to each other are likely to drive air travel demand



**DUBAI:** A pilot of an Emirates Airlines flight from London arrives at Dubai International Airport. — AFP

over the near term, Griffiths said, but it is impossible to say when travel could return to pre-pandemic levels. Passenger traffic at Dubai airport

fell by a fifth in the first quarter to 17.8 million as countries closed their borders due to the coronavirus outbreak. — Reuters

## Egypt leverages 'soft power' via medical aid

**CAIRO:** A slickly produced video from the office of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi showed crates of medical supplies—stamped in English and Arabic with the words "from the Egyptian people to the American people"—being loaded onto a military cargo plane.

The dramatically scored video released last month was Egypt's latest attempt to project soft power globally by sending medical aid to countries that have included China, Italy, Sudan and the United Kingdom. But analysts described these gestures of political goodwill as tokenistic at a time when Egypt's own healthcare system is overstretched.

In March—before the pandemic had claimed over 296,000 lives—Egypt's health minister Hala Zayed was the first minister from abroad to visit Beijing since the outbreak began. Zayed then appeared weeks later in a choreographed trip to Italy, an early European epicentre of the virus, personally delivering masks and gloves to the foreign minister.

Egyptians quickly lampooned her on social media, with one popular joke noting that Sisi was sending Zayed on mercy missions abroad hoping to get rid of her over her handling of the health crisis.

Pundits online also criticized her ministry for ignoring shortages of personal protective equip-

ment (PPE) among healthcare workers in Egypt. "Health diplomacy has been one of the traditional strategies for global south states who seek to have a more prominent role in the global arena," Gerasimos Tsourapas, a political scientist at the University of Birmingham, said. "I read this as a short-term strategy that may not be necessarily thought through to the end, given Egypt's growing needs for protective equipment."

"In terms of soft power, Egypt tends to prioritise foreign policy considerations over domestic ones," Tsourapas added. Egypt's confirmed COVID-19 cases have reached nearly 10,500 with over 550 fatalities, including nine doctors and six nurses. But some observers say the real toll could be much higher due to low levels of testing.

### 'No lasting impact'

Last month, Egypt sent the United States a C-130 military plane loaded with medical equipment. It was a striking role reversal for a country which is a leading recipient of American aid, receiving about \$1.3 billion annually. The plane brought 200,000 masks, 48,000 shoe covers and 20,000 surgical caps among other supplies, said Dutch Ruppertsberger, a Democrat in the US House of Representatives who heads a bipartisan group promoting relations with Egypt.

"This is why international diplomacy and maintaining relationships with allies like Egypt are essential not in times of crisis, but every day," he wrote on Twitter. But Yezid Sayigh, an expert on Egypt's military at Carnegie's Middle East Centre in Beirut, suggested the donation reflected the Sisi administration's "special fondness for PR gestures and rhetoric".

Sayigh said the message behind Egypt's



**In this file photo, Egypt's Health Minister Hala Zayed (center) inspects moored river boats along the coast of the Nile in the southern city of Luxor. A slickly produced video from Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's office, complemented by a dramatic score, showed in April crates of medical supplies in wrapping that read in English and Arabic, "from the Egyptian people to the American people," being loaded onto a military cargo plane. — AFP**

global outreach was intended to "buttress its claims about its superior wisdom and capability and its demands for respect domestically". But such moves were unlikely to have a lasting impact on Egypt's image abroad, Sayigh said.

"What will impress others is success in containing COVID-19 and getting the economy back on its feet," he added. "Foreign audience, domestic consumption" -

Since assuming power in 2014, following the military overthrow of former Islamist president Mohamed Morsi the year before, general-turned-president Sisi has cultivated personal re-

lationships with US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

These friendships have translated into considerable arms purchases, with Egypt ranking third globally in weapons imports. Last week, the State Department cleared the way for Egypt to refurbish 43 Apache helicopters in a deal worth \$2.3 billion. The military plays an outsized role in Egyptian public life, with activities ranging from building highways and producing Ramadan soap operas to most recently selling personal PPE to citizens. — AFP