

Fingerprinting for all visitors to USA

Air links in Asia improved

HONG KONG and China have signed a deal to boost the number of flights between their countries by 30 per cent. However, under the deal, Cathay Pacific cannot fly the sought-after Hong Kong to Shanghai route until October 2006. The move is seen to be part of China's continued liberalisation of air agreements with other countries.

"A liberal arrangement is crucial for strengthening Hong Kong's status as an international and regional aviation centre," said Stephen Ip, Hong Kong's Secretary for Economic Development. One Hong Kong-based start-up airline, Hong Kong Express, is already planning services to Guangzhou.

Meanwhile, Taiwan and South Korea are planning to restore direct air services between the two countries. Air links were broken off in 1992. □

All visitors to the USA will now have their index fingerprints scanned on arrival and be digitally photographed as part of the Department of Homeland Security's United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-Visit) programme, which was introduced to "expedite legitimate travellers, while making it more difficult for those intending to do harm to enter".

Previously, the 27 countries that are part of the Visa Waiver Programme (VWP) had been exempt from the requirements. However, the programme now includes all nationalities because a requirement for VWP countries to include biometric data, such as fingerprints, in passports by October was not met. Nationals from VWP countries can still enter the USA without a visa, but will be required to undergo the biometric checks.

US immigration officials stress the procedure is quick.

"We recognise that the visa waiver country travellers are among our best allies, friends and international guests," Asa Hutchinson, Undersecretary for Border and Transportation Security, told BBC News. "We are doing all we can to make sure the security measures cause minimal inconvenience."

Because of complaints about rude treatment of UK visitors, US border control staff are also being instructed to work by a polite code of conduct, it has been revealed. Robert Bonner, Commissioner for US Customs and Border Protection, told a meeting in London, "While we must – and will – secure our borders against terrorists, we must treat all travellers professionally and courteously." Handcuffing, detention and deportation of nationals committing minor visa violations would no longer occur, he added.

Those exempt from the new biometric ruling include diplo-

mats, children under 14 years of age and those over 79. Since introducing the US-Visit programme to non-VWP countries in January, Brazil has retaliated by demanding US visitors to the country are also fingerprinted. □

Georgia opens up

GEORGIA IN Eastern Europe has agreed to an open skies deal allowing European Union (EU) airlines to fly to the country from any EU city. "Both [parties] welcomed the agreement as a concrete step forward in the development of the overall relationship between the EU and Georgia," said a spokesperson for the European Commission.

It was decided last year that bilateral flight deals between EU members and other countries broke EU rules, so new unilateral agreements are being brokered. A similar deal with Chile has also been struck. □

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● Berlin's Schönefeld Airport in the eastern part of the city could be developed to become the German capital's main terminal, it has been announced. Bids are being invited to overhaul the airport. The more central Tempelhof Airport has closed and Tegel is currently the main city airport.

● Virgin Atlantic is planning on fleet expansion after signing a US\$5.5 billion deal with Airbus for 13 new aircraft, with an option on a further 13. Chairperson, Richard Branson, said, "This is by some way the biggest aircraft order in Virgin Atlantic's history and will enable us to double the size of the airline over the next five years." Virgin begins flying to Sydney, Cuba and the Bahamas next year.

● Police closed down Bulgaria's first-ever low-cost airline, Bexx Air, earlier this year because it did not have four necessary licences. The carrier,

which had offered flights as low as €30 (US\$37) one-way, had been popular with Bulgarians. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic's Smartwings has expanded its network, adding flights to Vienna, Rome, Dublin, London and Dubai to its schedule.

● Belgian carriers SN Brussels and Virgin Express are to join forces to give both companies more clout in the marketplace. SN Brussels was formed after the collapse of Sabena.

● Comair, based in South Africa and part-owned by British Airways, posted a US\$6.1 million operating profit for the 2004 financial year, bucking a trend by many other carriers towards decreasing profits, including rival South African Airways.

● EasyJet has axed routes between Copenhagen and Newcastle and Bristol because of the Danish airport's high charges.

"We are closing these routes to show the most expensive airports they need to lower their costs if they want to take part in passenger growth of low-cost carriers," said the airline in a statement. In the meantime, routes between Riga and Berlin, Tallinn and Berlin and Tallinn and London have been launched.

● Ryanair is boosting its flights from Skavsta Airport in southern Sweden by adding routes to Dusseldorf in Germany, Barcelona Girona in Spain and Riga in Latvia. The airline also added a route to Valencia in Spain from London Stansted in November and will add Almeria, Seville, and Porto in Portugal to the London Stansted operations from next year.

● Virgin Nigeria will take to the skies next year – the result of talks between Richard Branson and the Nigerian government. Virgin Atlantic will own a 49 per

cent stake in the airline, which is planning domestic and international services.

● British Airways has sold its share in Qantas for US\$770 million. Analysts predict more Qantas link-ups in Asia as a result of the airline's new direction.

● India has agreed to extend capacity on flights to and from Australia. Talks between governments have seen an agreement to boost seat sales immediately to 4,500 – more than double the current capacity of 2,100 seats. Meanwhile, the UK and India will also increase reciprocal flights to 40 per week by winter 2005, up from 19 at present.

● US Airways has filed for bankruptcy protection again, for the second time in two years. The move came after workers failed to agree to US\$800 million in cuts that would enable the airline to compete with its competitors.