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Airport to test new scanners for liquids

By Karamjit Kaur, The Straits Times | Thu, Aug 13 2009

High-tech screens could end restrictions on taking toiletries abroad.



The days of having to pack toiletries in re-sealable transparent plastic bags may be numbered, as airports are expected to test new scanning technology from next year.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (Icao) is now evaluating how effective and practical the scanners are in detecting liquids, aerosols and sprays that could be used as explosives.

Icao president Roberto Kobeh Gonzalez expects the new measures to be introduced as early as next year, he told The Straits Times in an interview during a visit to Singapore last week.

It has been three years since airports started imposing restrictions on liquids, gels and aerosols that can be carried onboard aircraft.

The current requirement at many airports is that all liquids and gels must be stored in containers with a maximum capacity of 100ml each.

These containers must be packed in re-sealable transparent plastic bags with a maximum capacity not exceeding 1 litre, and be made available for visual examination.

Icao – the civil aviation arm of the United Nations – wants to do away with the need for air travellers to be subject to such restrictions, without sacrificing security, said Mr Kobeh.

"It will remove restrictions for the passenger, but the screening will continue to ensure that there is no threat," he said.

He remembers vividly the events of Aug 10, 2006, when the British authorities foiled a terror plot to blow up as many as 10 aircraft in mid-air using liquid explosives.

He said: "It was my first week as Icao president." The incident created alarm, and governments and the airport authorities worldwide responded by introducing unilateral restrictions on checked-in and hand-carry baggage.

The result was massive chaos and confusion on the ground, and costly delays for airlines and airport.

Things are much better now because travellers know the rules and many airports, including Changi, have similar restrictions in place.

NEW TECHNOLOGY CAN DETECT DANGEROUS LIQUIDS

Still, the whole process is a pain for frequent flyers like finance officer Alvin Lim, 43: "Nothing beats just stuffing everything into your bag and taking off.

Plus don't forget that travellers have so many other rules to follow, like take off your shoes and belt, remove your laptop from the case and empty your pockets."

Three companies – London-based Kromek, Ahura Scientific in the United States and Jeol in Japan – are among the front runners who have developed capabilities to screen for dangerous liquids and gels.

Kromek's chief executive Arnab Basu told The Straits Times that when the new technology is available, the airport authorities will be able to detect dangerous liquids in the same way that they scan for other prohibited items with X-ray machines.

I realised that different people in different countries have...

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But even before that, some airports in the Middle East, Europe and the United States, have expressed interest in bottle scanners which will allow them to verify the contents of glass and plastic bottles, as well as aluminium cans.

The scanners which cost under US\$50,000 (S\$72,000) each are already on trial at some airports but Mr Basu declined to name them.

While he applauds the technology, Mr Philip Baum, editor of London-based Aviation Security International magazine said the best way forward is to use technology selectively so that high-risk passengers are thoroughly checked by whatever means, instead of a one-size-fits-all system that does little except slow things down for everyone.

A spokesman for Changi Airport Group said that new technologies to detect liquid explosives, if endorsed by Icao, will simplify and improve air travel.

"However, for smooth implementation, the equipment and measures must be widely adopted to facilitate transfer and transit passengers."

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