

Airport posts its biggest drop in a decade, with 851,000 fewer travellers

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Hong Kong International Airport suffered its biggest monthly drop in passengers in a decade, with a decline of 12.4 per cent – or at least 850,000 fewer travellers – in August as anti-government protests gripped the city.

The Airport Authority yesterday said the steep drop in passengers came largely from the mainland, Southeast Asia and Taiwan, all of which posted “significant declines”.

Hong Kong reported a 40 per cent decrease in tourist arrivals in August.

The airport said it handled 5.99 million passengers in August, a drop of 851,000 travellers compared to the same month last year. It was the single biggest decline since June 2009, when a fall of 18.9 per cent was posted.

Concerns for travellers were most evident on August 12 and August 13, when protesters caused a near complete shut-down of the airport and the cancellation of almost 1,000 flights.

“In the past few months, there have been huge challenges to airport operations at times,” said Ng Chi-kee, executive director of airport operations, in a press statement released yesterday.

Cargo volumes also fell 11.5 per cent as global trade tensions and a weak international economic environment continued.

So far this year, Hong Kong airport has handled 50.6 million passengers, a rise of 0.4 per cent.

In contrast, neighbouring Guangzhou has handled 4.9 per cent more passengers and traffic at Singapore Changi grew by 3.4 per cent to July.

United Airlines, one of three major American carriers, further downsized its Hong Kong flights over the weekend, amid a decrease in demand during the citywide protests.

The Chicago-headquartered company has switched all flights over the winter to Hong Kong from New York Newark and San Francisco to its smallest Boeing 777-200 aircraft.

The downsizing, according to

calculations by the *Post*, means the US carrier would offer 5,607 weekly seats to Hong Kong – based on a one-way calculation – a 25 per cent cut from the status quo and bigger than the 16 per cent capacity cut planned earlier.

Three weeks ago, United suspended its Chicago-Hong Kong flights indefinitely and moved forward the cancellation of its Guam-Hong Kong service. The carrier in June added a second daily flight from San Francisco to Hong Kong.

Scott Kirby, the president of United, reportedly said that the Hong Kong market was “terrible” in a room of investment analysts at a Morgan Stanley conference last week.

Qantas, Australia’s flag carrier, announced last month that it would cut its capacity to Hong Kong by 7 per cent by flying smaller planes.



Airlines are scaling back Hong Kong operations. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

Cathay Pacific and Cathay Dragon last week made a string of changes in response to the anti-government protests and the impact of Beijing’s pressure – factors that led to steep declines in business on mainland routes.

The carriers announced an 11.3 per cent decline in passengers in August compared to the previous year, including a 38 per cent slump in arrivals to the city. Hong Kong Airlines reported a 13 per cent decline for August.

Cathay Pacific has suspended Dublin flights over the winter, removed daytime flights to Paris and Frankfurt, and trimmed the number of flights to Vancouver, New York JFK and Washington.

Cathay Dragon suspended flights to Medan, Indonesia, and one daily flight each to Beijing and Tokyo.