

AP Interview: Emirates defends security as laptop ban looms

22 March 2017, by Adam Schreck



Emirates airline President Tim Clark listens to a question during an interview overlooking Dubai International Airport in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday, March 22, 2017. The president of the Middle East's biggest airline says a ban on electronics other than mobile phones in the cabins of U.S.-bound flights came as a complete surprise as he defended security measures at its Dubai hub. (AP Photo/Adam Schreck)

The president of Emirates, the Middle East's biggest airline, defended security measures at the carrier's Dubai hub on Wednesday and said the ban on personal electronics onboard U.S.-bound flights came without warning.

Tim Clark told The Associated Press that he only learned of the new U.S. regulations the previous day, saying the carrier "had no prior knowledge whatsoever." Emirates is now scrambling to ensure it is in compliance by a Saturday morning deadline—a target Clark said it would meet a day early.

Dubai was one of 10 cities in Muslim-majority countries affected by the new rule, which will force passengers to forego their tablets, laptops and other gadgets on direct flights to the U.S. Mobile

phones and medical devices will be allowed onboard.

Clark said Emirates would fully comply with the directive, even as he questioned why his airport's hub was included.

"I do find that a little bit surprising to be quite honest," he said. "When I travel around even the United States or Europe or Asia, I don't see this level of scrutiny that goes on in Dubai."

Emirati authorities work closely with their U.S. counterparts to ensure that "the people that they are concerned about coming into the United States do not board our flights," he added.

"Emirates and its owner, the government of Dubai, and the airport ... (are) as safe as any airport or any airline could possibly be," he said.



An Emirates plane taxis to a gate at Dubai International Airport at Dubai International Airport in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday, March 22, 2017. The president of the Middle East's biggest airline says a ban on electronics other than mobile phones in the cabins of U.S.-bound flights came as a complete surprise as he defended security measures at its Dubai hub. (AP Photo/Adam Schreck)

Britain issued similar restrictions a few hours after U.S. officials announced theirs, though Dubai and Abu Dhabi—the two United Arab Emirates hubs on the U.S. list—were not included in the British ban.

Emirates has expanded rapidly in the U.S. and elsewhere recent decades, and is one of the airlines most affected by the new U.S. rule.

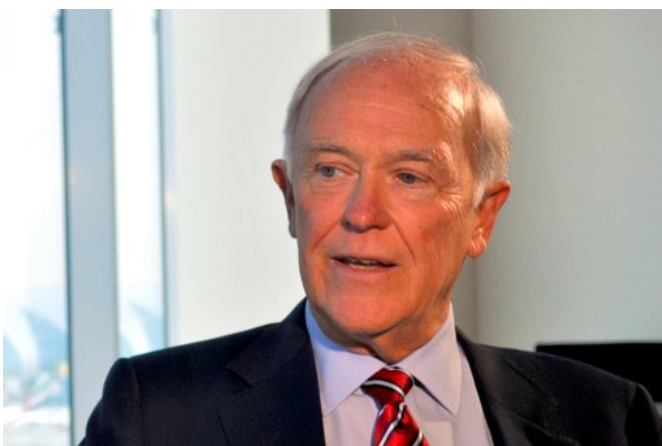
It operates 18 daily flights to a dozen U.S. cities, including major destinations such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, as well as smaller markets like Boston and Fort Lauderdale.

Many of the passengers it carries are not going to or from the Middle East, but transit through Dubai International Airport to points all over Emirates' far-flung global network. The airport is the world's busiest air hub for international passenger traffic, and the third busiest overall.

Emirates' success and that of smaller rivals Qatar Airways and Abu Dhabi-based Etihad Airways has rattled big U.S. airlines, who accuse the Gulf carriers of receiving billions of dollars of unfair government subsidies. They deny the allegations.

Clark was unaware of any specific security threats that prompted the U.S. directive, but he dismissed suggestions that protectionist pressures were behind the move.

"I can only assume the United States government has reasons to do what they're doing," he said.



Emirates airline President Tim Clark speaks to The Associated Press in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday, March 22, 2017. The president of the Middle East's biggest airline says a ban on electronics other than mobile phones in the cabins of U.S.-bound flights came as a complete surprise as he defended security measures at its Dubai hub. (AP Photo/Adam Schreck)

Emirates is the only carrier in Dubai affected by the new U.S. rules. Delta Air Lines and United Airlines stopped flying to the city last year.

The airline boss said Emirates was stung by the Trump administration's executive orders to restrict travel to passengers from seven Muslim-majority nations, with demand for the U.S. less robust than before.

"Frankly it's not surprising given what has been going on," he said, adding that Emirates has no plans to scale back on its U.S. operations. "This is not going to stop us."

Emirates is racing to implement plans to let passengers use their laptops and other devices until they are ready to board their U.S.-bound flights.

The gadgets would be collected before takeoff and stowed securely in cargo holds before being handed back to passengers once they land, Clark said. Passengers on flights connecting in Dubai wouldn't need to hand them in until boarding the U.S.-bound leg.

That may be little consolation for business travelers hoping to get some work done on the long haul from Dubai to the U.S.—a journey that can last up to two-thirds of a day.

Clark suggested they try to look on the bright side.

"For once I don't have to bang out all the emails," he said. "I've got a perfect excuse to say to the boss, 'I couldn't do any work because of the ban.'"

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