

Insight •
Are sanctions really hurting Russia?
|B3



The Big Story •
Greening bus stop roofs to cool the city
|A5



Life •
More time to learn from home
|C1



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S'pore aviation firms ramp up hiring amid surge in air travel

Almost all types of airport workers in strong demand amid tight labour market

Clement Yong

When Singapore Airlines (SIA) resumed hiring in February after a two-year freeze, the airline aimed to recruit 2,000 cabin crew trainees by March next year.

It has hired 1,200 people to date, and now wants to bring in the remaining 800 by December, as air travel continues to rebound from the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic.

With borders open, the airline is also considering restarting hiring from places outside Singapore and Malaysia, which it did before the pandemic in China, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan.

Like SIA, other companies in the local aviation sector are pulling out all the stops to replenish their ranks.

From ground handlers to security staff, cleaners, cabin crew and air traffic controllers, nearly all types of airport workers are in strong demand, amid a tight labour market.

Manpower shortages have been a key hurdle for airlines in the Asia-Pacific.

In Australia, for instance, a lack of workers has left airlines and airports unable to keep up with demand since unrestricted travel resumed early this year.

In Singapore, Changi Airport's handling capacity has largely stayed abreast of growing passenger traffic.

Singapore Institute of Technology Associate Professor Volodymyr Bilotkach, who heads its air transport management degree programme, noted that major Asian markets such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan remain re-

stricted, which limits the speed and extent of the recovery in Asia.

Overall Asia passenger traffic is expected to hit only 70 per cent to 80 per cent by year end.

In Europe, it has already surpassed 90 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, outstripping what manpower levels can handle.

"If China were open for business now, we'd be having similar issues to what Europeans are experiencing," Prof Bilotkach said.

The total number of Changi Airport workers increased from 25,000 to 29,000 in the first half of the year. Transport Minister S. Iswaran last week said another 3,500 to 4,000 people are needed, with passenger traffic expected to hit 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels in October.

If achieved, this would bring the total number of airport workers to about 33,000 people – 95 per cent of what it was before.

Sats, Changi Airport's biggest ground handler, said its staff headcount has exceeded 80 per cent of 2019 levels as at June – on a par with the general manpower recovery in the sector.

To fill some of the 600 positions available, however, it has had to pay "significantly" higher salaries – as much as 30 per cent more – typically for more specialised roles. Sats did not elaborate on what these roles were when asked.

The jobs that it has available include passenger service agents, air logistics specialists, skilled ground support equipment drivers, technical ramp servicemen and aviation catering production.

Mr Musdalifa Abdullah, managing director of ground handler dnata, said the firm conducted a salary benchmarking review for all

roles last year to ensure it can attract the people it needs, without confirming if dnata had raised wages. The firm has filled 375 positions this year to reach 65 per cent of its pre-pandemic headcount.

SIA and the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS), which hires air traffic controllers, did not say whether they have increased pay when asked.

Since the start of the year, SIA has received thousands of applications for cabin crew, with snaking lines in front of its office.

All of its more than 3,000 pilots have also now been brought back and are on active duty, and only a "small number" had left in the intervening two years.

CAAS has hired 30 air traffic controllers this year, and noted that it had continued recruiting throughout the pandemic.

Mr Subhas Menon, director-general of the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines, said that while pilots and air traffic controllers were affected by the pandemic, the greatest shortage in Singapore – as well as elsewhere – is more likely in ground handling, hospitality, security and immigration.

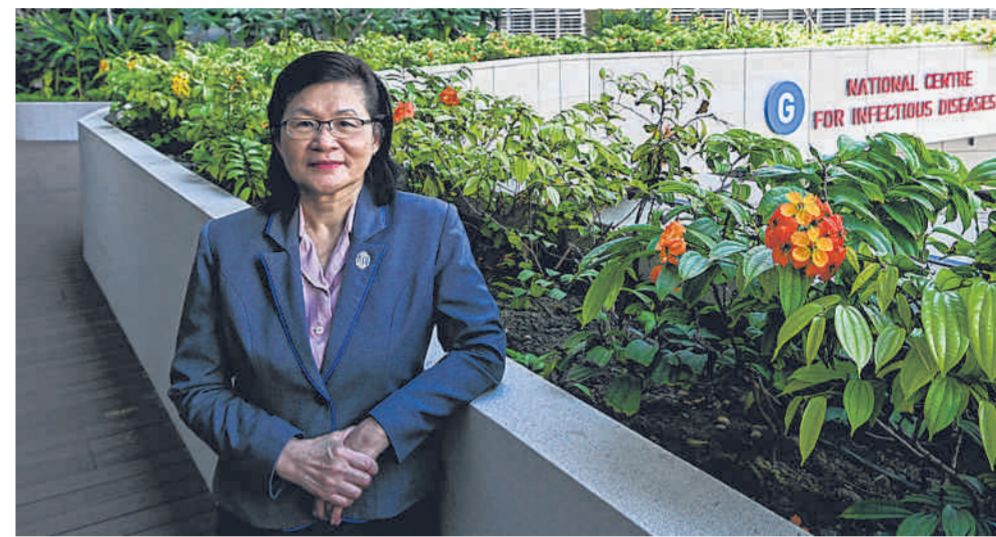
During the pandemic, when governments issued financial help to the sector, these outsourced sections of the industry were more likely to have received less help and lost more workers, he noted.

Their skills are also less specific to the aviation industry so they have more options to join other sectors.

SIT's Prof Bilotkach said: "Labour is the key. Airlines and airports need to invest into human capital now, in anticipation of traffic recovery, not put it off until the passengers return, which was the mistake Europeans and Americans have made."

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SEE THE BIG STORY • A2



National Centre for Infectious Diseases executive director Leo Yee Sin says the centre is boosting its clinical, public health and research arms to deal with the next disease to hit Singapore. PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

NCID boosting capabilities to deal with next pandemic

Joyce Teo
Senior Health Correspondent

The nation's key pandemic-fighting powerhouse is being strengthened to help Singapore cope with the next disease to hit the country, even as it continues to battle current outbreaks.

After a baptism of fire with Covid-19, the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), which turns three this month, is boosting its clinical, public health and research arms to deal with Disease X, said its executive director Leo Yee Sin.

It is what it calls anticipatory preparedness.

"It's just remarkable that within... a very short three to four years, we have experienced multiple outbreaks," Professor Leo said, in an exclusive interview with The Straits Times recently.

"Singapore is so connected that when anything happens in other parts of the world, we will be affected."

NCID, which has a staff strength of 800, is progressively growing the team and looking for more nurses and doctors.

The centre, alongside the national Programme for Research in Epidemic Preparedness and Response, or Prepare, is also working on strengthening infectious

disease collaboration networks locally and regionally.

It is ramping up diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccine capabilities, and establishing a national infectious disease repository and database for research and data analysis.

"NCID's role is to be able to function adequately as a first responder, to be able to work closely with the Government... to strengthen the system, the surveillance," said Prof Leo.

This means that all new cases of infectious diseases will first go to the centre, which allows the team there to study and understand the intruder quickly. "Then we can share all this information that influences policy decision-making," she added.

In the early days of the pandemic, all the cases were sent to NCID, which could then monitor patients and study the disease.

"We found it very useful that within one to two weeks of managing the cases, we were able to understand the condition so much more," Prof Leo said. "So I think that kind of advantage that we have built up in NCID needs to be further strengthened."

Discussions about how to strengthen the public health component are also going on.

Although the coronavirus is less of a threat now, it is still changing, Prof Leo noted.

"Covid-19 is so complex that what's happening in the United States may not happen here. It means that whatever the US is doing, we cannot follow wholesale..."

"We have to find our own way to understand how Covid-19 will impact us and then find the best strategies."

Singapore has relaxed most restrictions as the situation stabilises amid high vaccination rates. But whether the Omicron sub-variants that have emerged in other parts of the world will show up here and behave in the same way is unclear.

The authorities have said the Republic needs to be prepared for a year-end wave that may be caused by a variant that dodges immunity from past infection.

"We cannot, at this point in time, think that the world has overcome Covid-19," she said. "We need to stay connected regionally and internationally, understand what's going on, and then elevate our ability in terms of our capability of detecting any new things coming into Singapore."

This is why NCID maintains very good international connections so that it can get first-hand information of any new diseases.

When monkeypox became a problem in Europe in May, for instance, the centre linked up with clinicians and researchers in Britain and France to understand the situation, even before the first case showed up in Singapore on June 20. The Republic now has 16 cases, while the World Health Organisation has recorded more than 50,000 cases in the current global outbreak.

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SEE THE BIG STORY • A3

Triathlon return sets pulses racing



Over 1,200 people took the plunge at East Coast Park on Sunday as the TriFactor Triathlon Singapore returned after a two-year hiatus owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. Competitors raced in four categories – long, standard, sprint and freshmen – while children aged between six and 12 participated in the Kids' distance event. National triathlete Luke Chua won the national sprint championship men's elite category in 1hr 26sec while Filipina Raven Alcosoba won the women's title in 1hr 6min 46sec. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH SEE SPORT • B16

Landslide • Repair work may take months

It may take a few months to repair the damage caused by the recent landslide at a Clementi Build-To-Order (BTO) site, said National Development Minister Desmond Lee, who visited the area on Sunday.

The landslide occurred in the early hours of last Friday, at the Clementi NorthArc construction site in Clementi Avenue 6. It damaged the Ulu Pandan park connector and displaced soil into the Ulu Pandan Canal.

Over the past two days, the Housing Board, National Parks Board and national water agency PUB have been working round the clock to carry out immediate repair and slope stabilisation recovery works, the minister said.

A section of the park connector has been reopened, but another section remains closed for public safety.

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