



European carriers are encouraged by increased passenger numbers out of the new Beirut

Making a comeback

Beirut International Airport is upgrading to meet the return of passenger traffic.

CHRIS YATES/MANCHESTER

BEIRUT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT is benefiting from its first substantial facelift for nearly two decades, following the cessation of hostilities and the ravages of the Lebanese civil war in 1991. Up to \$590 million has been earmarked for the upgrade, which the airport management and the Lebanese Government hope will place the city back on destination boards around the world.

"The project is in four phases, and work on the first has already started. We hope that it will be finished by the last quarter of 1998," says airport general manager Chafiqe Abouchi. "The work involves construction of a new terminal building and hotel complex, two new runways, general-aviation [GA] apron — including VIP lounges — a new control tower, car parking and some modification to local highways," he says.

The condition of Beirut Airport is such that, alongside the primary installations, the airport authority will also have to rebuild its support services infrastructure, in particular the maintenance areas, customs and catering areas. A refuelling depot will also be constructed, while the installation of a dedicated combined heat and power plant to ensure continuous supply free from outage is being considered.

Prime contractors for the project are Athens-based Consolidated Contractors International (CCIC) and Hochtief of Germany.

Funding for the project is from airport revenues, the Lebanese Government and loans from leading financial institutions worldwide. The Kuwait Fund for Arabic Economic

Development is providing a \$50 million loan, and the European Investment Bank (EIB) has made a further ECU90 million (\$112.5 million) available in two tranches.

The EIB says: "For obvious reasons, we stopped our financing during Lebanon's civil war, but after the so-called Tariff Agreement we took the initiative once again. In December 1994 we loaned ECU80 million to Beirut Airport for its rehabilitation. In July, we made a further ECU10 million available to upgrade its air-traffic-management [ATM] systems.

He adds: "This is part of our general participation in the reconstruction of Lebanon, for which EIB has loaned some ECU170 million since 1993. Our focus is on infrastructure projects which realise the physical links between Lebanon and the European Community (EU), and that is why we have invested heavily in the port, airport, air-traffic management and so on."

Some of the ATM systems are already in place. "We have installed two doppler VORs, ILS [instrument-landing system], twin non-directional beacons and installation of a new solid-state S-band radar system from Raytheon will be completed in about 18 months' time," says Abouchi.

FIRST MAJOR INVESTMENT

Aside from safety-critical general maintenance such as runway rehabilitation, the work under way is the first major investment in infrastructure since the airport opened over 40 years ago.

In passenger terms alone, the airport is cramped and becoming even more so as throughput increases. "Airsides, our runways

have been neglected for the best part of 17 to 20 years and are not capable now of accommodating widebody aircraft movements. To handle such traffic, the two new runways will be longer — 3,800m [12,500ft] and 3,600m, respectively — and wider," says Abouchi.

"Construction of the West runway will involve a 1,900m extension into the Mediterranean. In future, all aircraft will approach over the sea. That will be introduced mainly for noise-abatement reasons, but it should also ease restrictions on construction of high-rise buildings within Beirut itself," he adds.

In the interim, the two existing runways will remain in service and a recent substantial upgrade has included an almost complete rewire of runway and associated taxiway lighting systems to ensure compliance with minimum safety requirements.

Located 16km (10 miles) south of the city at Khaldeh — and served by a growing number of airlines despite Lebanon's reputation as once being a refuge for terrorists — Abouchi believes that the airport has great potential for growth. "Lebanese people are spread all over the world and we must provide the facilities to meet their travel needs. Also, we're planning for the future and, in particular, the potential for growth that tourism will bring to this country."

He goes on to say: "This airport was built in 1952 and is now far too small for our needs and the needs of our passengers and airlines. The first phase of development will allow us to accommodate 6 million people a year, and the following three phases will each add a further 3-4 million to our capacity. By 2032, we expect to receive 16 million passengers annually."

"Hopefully, by the beginning of 1997, we will receive the first part of the new airport so that we can begin demolition and create space for other new buildings," says the airport manager. □