

Emirates, Qatar not interested in Sri Lanka's 'emptiest airport'

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Dhaka: Sri Lanka's efforts to revive the struggling Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport have hit yet another setback, as leading Gulf airlines declined to operate from the facility, the country's Deputy Civil Aviation Minister Janitha Ruwan Kodithuwakku confirmed.

Earlier, Sri Lanka's Civil Aviation Authority had formally invited multiple international carriers, particularly major Gulf airlines including Emirates and Qatar Airways, to use the airport for operations, refueling, and transit during the ongoing Middle East conflict.

However, despite offering attractive concessions, including free landing and parking services, no airline has committed to any operational plans.

"We have informed them to use the airport, but so far, no one has

expressed any willingness," the deputy minister said.

Industry observers attribute the lack of interest to the airport's infrastructure and capacity limitations. With an annual passenger handling capacity of around one million, Mattala is not equipped to support the large-scale operations required by major international carriers.

"These are large airlines with complex logistics. It is not practical for them to shift operations to a location like Mattala," Kodithuwakku added.

Widely dubbed "the world's emptiest international airport," Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport has become a symbol of underutilized infrastructure and economic miscalculation. Built at a cost of USD 209 million, largely financed through high-interest Chinese loans, the airport has failed to generate expected returns.

Over the past six years, the facility has accumulated net losses exceeding LKR 39 billion, with expenditure outpacing income by nearly fifteen times. An annual interest burden of LKR 2.05 billion on foreign debt obligations continues to strain Sri Lanka's already fragile economy.

The airport's remote location in Hambantota, far from Colombo's commercial aviation hub, has compounded its troubles. Limited connectivity, an absence of scheduled international flights, and weak passenger demand remain persistent challenges.

A proposed 30-year management deal involving an India-Russia joint venture also collapsed due to legal complications and concerns related to international sanctions, stalling privatization efforts further.

As Sri Lanka continues its economic recovery, the Mattala Airport situation stands as a stark cautionary tale about poorly aligned infrastructure development strategies.