

US, UK airlines urge lifting of travel restrictions

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New York: Summer vacation season is underway without a key element this year: packed flights between the United States and London due to COVID travel restrictions.

Airline and airport executives on both sides of the Atlantic say the lifting of restrictions is overdue given high COVID vaccination rates and what they call low risk of COVID transmission on flights and on Monday pressed President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to take action as early as this week's G7 summit in England.

"These are the poster children of good vaccination programs," said John Holland-Kaye, CEO of London's Heathrow Airport. "There needs to be a prize for that."

The prize: ending what airlines say has effectively been a 15-month travel ban. Most U.S. travelers can't visit London without quarantining for 10 days, and U.K. residents are not allowed to travel to the U.S. under a broad ban on international travelers put in place early in the pandemic. British Airways CEO Sean Doyle noted that the second runway at Heathrow was closed Monday and said the airport hasn't seen such a limited number of flights since World War II. Holland-Kaye said a pact is "absolutely critical to both countries."

In contrast, some European Union countries, including France and Spain, are already reopening their borders to American vacationers who are vaccinated, even if the United States is not open to travelers from those countries. The United Kingdom left the EU in early 2020.

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National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Monday that there is no timetable for lifting restrictions on travel to the United States.

"We have heard very clearly the desire of our friends in Europe and the U.K. to be able to reopen travel across the Atlantic Ocean, and we want to see that happen," he said at a White House press briefing. "But we have to follow the science, and we have to follow the guidance of our public health professionals. We're actively engaging them to determine the time frame."

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Sunday that the rise of invariant cases may delay the government's plan to lift most remaining lockdown restrictions on June 21. Coronavirus infections have doubled in the last week, and there's some concern this could mark the beginning of the third wave of cases, according to the BBC.

Airlines and tourism officials for months have pressed for a travel corridor between the United States and the United Kingdom as the first step toward reopening long-haul international travel to and from the United States.

In May, travel industry leaders urged the creation of a public-private task force by the end of May to develop a "risk-based, data-driven road map for safely reopening international travel," but no task force has been created.

On Monday, executives from several U.S. and [U.K. airlines](#) offering transatlantic flights held a news conference to press their case for a reopening as soon as possible.

"We are in the peak travel season for travel between the U.S. and U.K.," United CEO Scott Kirby said. "Every single day that goes by is a day lost for the recovery."

The airline and airport executives on the call suggested a reason the restrictions haven't been lifted is that the U.S. and U.K. governments want to reach even higher vaccination levels. Biden's goal is to have 70% of adults with one vaccine dose by July 4.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian and American CEO Doug Parker said opening the borders to vaccinated travelers would encourage more people to get vaccinated.

"One of the reasons why we're having challenges (in the U.S.) getting over this last 20 to 30% percent done is what are the incentives for people being vaccinated other than just simply their own welfare," Bastian said. "Well, a great incentive is to be able to travel internationally."

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Sullivan said the final decision on reopening international travel to the U.S. rests with U.S. public health officials.

"At the end of the day this is a process being driven by science and public health guidance," he said.

When restrictions are lifted, airlines say they plan to add flights between the U.S. and U.K. faster than they normally would give pent-up travel demand.

Kirby said United can ramp up flights within a month of any reopening date.

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