

This follows widespread flight cancellations and diversions amid escalating hostilities between the United States, Israel and Iran.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

The Government of Uganda has announced visa extensions for passengers whose travel plans were disrupted by Middle East airspace closures triggered by the ongoing US/Israel-Iran conflict.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, through the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control (DCIC), said foreign nationals stranded in Uganda after cancelled or diverted flights will have their visas extended at no cost. Ugandan travellers whose departures were interrupted have also been advised to report to immigration offices to regularise their travel records.

Mr Simon Mundeysi, the spokesperson for the Internal Affairs ministry, said passengers who were processed for departure but did not reach their destinations must report to Immigration at Entebbe International Airport to cancel their exit records.

"There were passengers whose destinations included Dubai, Riyadh, and other Middle Eastern cities. Some were stopped mid-air and returned to Entebbe, but our immigration system had already cleared them as having left the country," Mr Mundeysi said.

"If they do not correct this, they might face complications in future travel. Their passports will show that they travelled on a certain date, even though in reality they did not reach the intended destination," he added.

The directive follows widespread flight cancellations and diversions after several Gulf states closed or restricted their airspace amid escalating hostilities between the United States, Isra-

Stranded travellers to get free visa extensions



Travellers line up at Entebbe International Airport. Flights to Gulf states have been halted as they have closed their airspaces due to the US/Israel-Iran war. PHOTO/FILE

el and Iran.

Authorities said some of the most affected passengers were on an Air Arabia flight to the United Arab Emirates that had already departed from Entebbe but was denied landing clearance and forced to return. By that time, all passengers had been cleared in the immigration system as having exited the country.

The directive also applies to foreign nationals residing in Uganda whose visas expired after their planned departures were cancelled or diverted.

"Foreigners whose visas have expired due to these disruptions should return to Immigration. We shall extend their visas free of charge," Mr Mundeysi said, adding that tourists stranded after returning flights were cancelled are also encouraged to regularise their stay.

The travel disruptions stem from coordinated airstrikes by the US/Israel on Iran, including attacks in Tehran that reportedly killed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and senior military officials. Tehran retaliated with missile and drone strikes target-

ing US bases and allied facilities across the Gulf.

In response, countries including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iraq closed or restricted their airspace, resulting in thousands of cancelled, diverted or delayed international flights.

Immigration authorities estimate that between 3,000 and 4,000 passengers are currently stranded at Entebbe International Airport.

"The number keeps increasing because more people continue booking flights. This will continue as long as the conflict and airspace closures persist," Mr Mundeysi said.

Passengers have been advised to postpone non-essential travel until the situation stabilises.

"Life is the most important thing. Those intending to travel should wait for normalcy in the Middle East before embarking on any journey," he said.

Labour exporters affected

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has also urged labour export companies to temporarily suspend sending workers to the Middle East.

"With ongoing strikes and retaliations, I would not advise any Ugandan to risk their life for a job. Labour export companies should hold off and monitor developments before sending workers," Mr Mundeysi advised.

The disruptions have also affected government non-tax revenue, particularly from passport issuance. Officials said some individuals who had booked appointments to collect passports had not turned up after their travel plans were cancelled.

IMPORT VOLUMES

Data from the Bank of Uganda shows that in the 12 months to December 2024, at least 33.4 percent of Uganda's \$8.04 billion (Shs28.9 trillion) total export receipts, equivalent to \$2.68 billion (Shs9.6 trillion), came from the Middle East, underscoring the region's economic significance to Uganda.