

Stung by virus, long-haul carrier Qatar Airways cuts jobs

6 May 2020, by Jon Gambrell



In this Nov. 7, 2019 file photo, a Qatar Airways jet approaches Philadelphia International Airport in Philadelphia. Long-haul carrier Qatar Airways said Wednesday, May 6, 2020, it will fire staff as the coronavirus pandemic largely has grounded the global aviation industry. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

Long-haul carrier Qatar Airways said Wednesday it will lay off staff as the coronavirus pandemic largely has grounded the global aviation industry.

The Doha-based carrier offered no figures for the number of employees who will be laid off by the carrier, one of the three major airlines in the Persian Gulf region created to capitalize on East-West travel. However, an emailed memo from the airline's CEO that leaked online said the number would be "substantial" and include members of its cabin crew.

"The global outlook for our industry looks grim and many airlines are closing or significantly reducing operations," Akbar Al Baker wrote in the memo, dated Sunday. "Now, we have to face a new reality, where many borders are closed, rendering many of our destinations closed and aircraft grounded as a result, with no foreseeable outlook

for immediate, positive change."

Qatar Airways sent a statement to The Associated Press on Wednesday confirming the layoffs.

"The unparalleled impact on our industry has caused significant challenges for all airlines and we must act decisively to protect the future of our business," the statement said.

Both Qatar Airways and Al Baker said the airline hoped to rehire staff quickly once global aviation emerges from the pandemic. Later Wednesday, the airline said it hoped to grow around 30 routes still flying to over 50 by the end of May and 80 by the end of June. Before the pandemic, the airline said it flew to over 160 destinations a day.

Qatar Airways, which began flying in 1994, has a fleet of over 200 aircraft that it flies out of Doha's recently built Hamad International Airport. It competes with Abu Dhabi-based Etihad Airways and Dubai-based Emirates, two other state-owned airlines now facing the dire economic situation brought on by the coronavirus and the COVID-19 illness it causes.

Since the pandemic, Qatar Airways like other Gulf airlines has flown repatriation flights, as well as stepped up its cargo operations. But the pandemic has chewed away the aviation industry to the point that Emirates President Tim Clark warned in a recent conference call that "85% of all airlines will be insolvent within two or three months" without government assistance.



Customers have a drink at a restaurant in Beirut, Lebanon, Monday, May 4, 2020. Lebanon is entering a new phase of the lockdown Monday, allowing, barber shops, car showrooms and restaurants to open at 30% capacity during the day. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Qatar Airways already faced challenges before the pandemic. In 2017, a group of four Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates, began a boycott Doha over a political dispute that continues today, affecting the airline's ability to reach vital markets and fly over those nations.

Qatar is a small, energy-rich nation on the Arabian Peninsula that juts out like a thumb into the Persian Gulf. The country is home to the vast Al-Udeid Air Base, hosts some 10,000 American troops and is the forward headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command.

In Lebanon, 25 new coronavirus infections were confirmed among citizens who arrived on a plane from Nigeria on Wednesday, the country's state-run National News Agency reported.

Lebanon, which has around 750 confirmed cases, has consistently reported low numbers of new infections in the past two weeks, but experts warn the ongoing repatriation of up to 20,000 Lebanese returning to the country could cause a setback.

On Monday, Lebanon began easing lockdown restrictions in place since mid-March, allowing some businesses, including restaurants and hair

salons, to reopen at 30% capacity.

Lebanon's interior minister also announced Wednesday that churches and mosques would be permitted to welcome worshippers on Sundays and Fridays as long as they do so at limited capacity while respecting social distancing and other safety guidelines.

Lebanon has been hit by crippling economic and financial crisis that has only deepened in the wake of the nationwide virus lockdown.

The American University of Beirut, one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the Middle East, became the latest institution in Lebanon to announce it was facing a crisis due to what it said was a "confluence of calamities" starting with the collapse of the Lebanese economy, compounded by the pandemic.

It said staff would endure significant pay reductions and that steps under consideration include furloughs as well as the closure of some programs and departments.

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