

Airlines launch legal action against UK over quarantine

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British Airways, easyJet and Ryanair said on Friday they have launched legal action against the UK government over what they said was a "flawed" coronavirus quarantine system.

The airlines, among the three biggest operators in the country, said the policy will have "a devastating effect on British tourism and the wider economy and destroy thousands of jobs".

The trio said in a statement they have asked for a judicial review to be heard as soon as possible.

"There was no consultation and no scientific evidence provided for such a severe policy," they added as among the reasons for the legal challenge.

The airlines also argued it was more stringent than the government's advice to people actually infected with the virus, who must self-isolate for seven days, and highlighted inconsistencies in the various exemptions permitted.

Since Monday, most people arriving in Britain from

abroad must quarantine for two weeks, to limit potential new infections from abroad.

The ailing aviation sector hit back, as it struggles to bounce back from mass cancellations of flights and a slump in passenger numbers, as countries around the world locked down.

British residents and overseas visitors must comply with the self-isolation rules or face a £1,000 (\$1,250, 1,125-euro) fine or prosecution.

Britain, which is gradually easing stay-at-home restrictions, has seen more than 40,000 deaths in the global pandemic and is the worst-hit country in Europe.

But critics have questioned why the country is inflicting more pain on hotels and airlines by reducing travel from countries with fewer virus cases.

The chief executive of London's Heathrow airport, John Holland-Kaye, has said it could lead to the loss of potentially 25,000 jobs.

Exemptions are being made, including for lorry drivers, "essential" healthcare workers and people travelling from Ireland who have been there for at least two weeks.

But the measure is still expected to prove a strong deterrent to travel to Britain.

'Backed by the science'

Home Secretary Priti Patel told sceptical lawmakers in parliament last week the measure was "backed by the science, supported by the public, and essential to save lives".

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has said it will review the policy every three weeks.

Meanwhile it is trying to arrange so-called "air bridges" with European countries popular with British travellers that could see an easing of the quarantine from those places.

However Spain, one of the most popular summer destinations for Britons, said this week it was not in discussion with London over such a move.

BA and the budget carriers said they had planned to launch immediate joint legal proceedings over the step, but delayed because of an expected announcement on travel corridors.

In their statement Friday, the airlines said they have "not yet seen any evidence on how and when proposed 'air bridges' between the UK and other countries will be implemented".

The airlines said they want the government to reinstate measures introduced on March 10 which saw only passengers from "high risk" countries quarantined.

"This would be the most practical and effective solution and enables civil servants to focus on other, more significant, issues arising from the pandemic while bringing the UK in line with much of Europe which is opening its borders mid-June," they added.

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