

# Suvarnabhumi Airport

## A Blend of Modern Western Architecture with Traditional Thai Cultural Artwork

Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport finally opened on 28 September 2006, after being rushed through to completion by the dismissed Thai Prime Minister Thaksin. With a projected traffic reaching 42 million passenger in 2007, Suvarnabhumi (pronounced as "soo-wan-na-poom") is reaching its capacity of 45 million passengers a year. The new airport has been mired by problems since its opening, including more than 100 cracks on taxiways and runways, corruption claims, inadequate toilets and facilities, and complaints about hygiene standards. Now the question arises whether Suvarnabhumi - assisted by the old Don Muang Airport - is the long awaited answer to the insatiable aviation needs of Bangkok.

By Hubert Croes

Plans for a new airport for Bangkok already existed in the early seventies. In 1973 former dictator Thanom Kittikachorn purchased 3238 hectares in the low-lying marsh called the "Cobra Swamp" with the purpose of reclaiming new land for building a new international airport for Bangkok. After his military government was overthrown by the student uprising on October 14 of the same year the project was shelved. Meanwhile, Thailand's rapidly growing tourism business led to an overcrowded Don Muang Airport, where there was no room for further expansion. It was not until the early nineties when the Thai government decided to revive the project as the urgency to build a new airport became more and more apparent; this led to the formation of the "New Bangkok International Airport Company" (NBIA) in 1996. However, political and economical instabilities and notably the Asian financial crisis of 1997 caused civil construction to begin six years later in January 2002. In 2005, the construction supervision and management was transferred to the Airports of Thailand PLC, while the NBIA Company was dissolved. The former Prime Minister Thaksin embraced the project the pet of the Thai Rak Thai administration. He publicly declared that the airport must be operational in September 2005, and all efforts were concentrated on the accelerated construction of the terminal and runways. Construction of other 'non vital'



Photo 1: Suvarnabhumi Airport Concourse C

facilities like a rail connection with the inner city of Bangkok were postponed. In September 2006, the Thaksin administration was overthrown by a military junta using allegedly substandard construction as one of its justifications for its coup.

The name Suvarnabhumi was chosen by HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej which means "The Golden Land", specifically referring to the continental Indochina. "Golden Peninsula" or "Golden Land" is a traditional name for the Thailand-Cambodia-Laos-Burma region.

### A Mega-Terminal

The seven story state-of-the-art passenger terminal, a blend of modern steel and glass framework with tradi-

tional Thai interior and covers an area of 182.000m<sup>2</sup> comprising the terminal itself as well as the concourses. Designed to shade the building against intense tropical heat and to reduce air conditioning costs, the new innovative roof trellis is one of the largest of its kind. The steel and glass framework allows much natural light in the building. With a capacity of handling 76 flight operations per hour and 45 million passengers per year, both international and domestic flights will share the airport terminal but will be assigned to different parts of the concourse. Total costs of the project are estimated at 3.9 billion dollars.

After much local criticism, arguing that the airport was rushed through to

completion, the airport finally became fully operation on 28 September 2006. Overall Suvarnabhumi worked quite well for a newly opened facility, relieving the congestion which was well known at Don Muang. Just after a few weeks of operation, the performance related to passengers and airlines, exceeded airline managers' expectations, which were utterly critical about the readiness of the airport ahead of its 28 September opening. The new facility meant less congestion at security check-point and immigration, more contact gates, arrival area is spacious with more than double the number of immigration inspection booths, a relatively well working baggage handling system, less vehicle congestion at the arrival and departure areas, and as some say "a blend of modern western architecture with traditional Thai cultural artwork".

Many difficulties were recorded the first few days of the airport's operation. Passengers and airline managers cited problems with poor and insufficient signage, dirty and insufficient number of toilets, the lack of tele-

phone connectivity, poor design of utilization space, overall cleanliness, and the lack of moving walking walkways. The lay-out of the airport may mean significant walking distances from the sober decorated concourses - much concrete with a minimal use of colours - to the main terminal. On the first day alone, problems with luggage claims resulted to passengers having to wait for hours. Some flight did not have their luggage coming out after four hours. Airport authorities say the system could not sort luggage quickly enough, because bags from other countries were tagged with excessive information that overloaded Suvarnabhumi's system. An update of the automatic baggage handling system is believed to resolve the problem of stranded baggage, allowing passenger luggage to again be sorted automatically by the conveyor belt system. Many flights were delayed and there were also failures of the check-in system. Subsequent problems included the failure of the cargo computer system, and the departure boards displaying the wrong information, resulting in confused passengers.

### Air cargo

Most complaints have dealt with the airport's handling of cargo. Unclear documentation requirements, insufficient cargo space, processing delays and the lack of experienced contributed to the disorder frustrating business that had goods, including perishable items, to be stranded for days.

Meanwhile, DHL launched its new 22-million-dollar hub at Suvarnabhumi Airport. The new facility measures 12.000m<sup>2</sup> (5 times larger than the former facilities at Don Muang) and is capable of handling 23.000 pieces per hour. The new gateway to Indochina is considered to play an important role in the company's strategy to boost its growth in Southeast Asia

### Expansion

The original master plan envisages two subsequent expansions, boosting up annual capacity to 100 million passengers and doubling cargo-handling capacity to 6.4 million tones. Unfortunately, the plan to build a mid-field terminal, a third runway and sup-



**Photo 2:** A Blend of Modern Western Architecture with Traditional Thai Cultural Artwork

porting facilities that would raise capacity to 54 million in 2011, was already shelved by the former prime minister Thaksin. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, appointed by the junta led administration after the September coup, reiterated in *The Nation*, that the expansion of Suvarnabhumi Airport would be kept on hold until a full assessment of the damage to its runways and taxiways is completed.

Experts say Suvarnabhumi Airport may need to be expanded more quickly than planned to provide the room needed to accommodate fast growing air traffic. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation (Cepa), the airport's annual capacity of 45 million passengers will be reached quickly. Airports of Thailand Plc (AoT) president is keen to complete a passenger terminal for low-cost carriers (LCC's), with usable space of 20,000 square meters. The LCC terminal could handle 15 million passengers a year.

### Reopening Don Muang

With the opening of Suvarnabhumi Airport, the Thai government opted to close down Don Muang for scheduled commercial flights, except for charters and government flight. The Royal Thai Air force was to remain at Don Muang. However, considering the imminent capacity problems at the new airport, the question arise whether the air transportation needs of Bangkok could be catered by a single airport.

The discussion is further fuelled by cracks discovered at the airport's taxiways and runways leading to damage sections being closed off while repair work is carried out. On 25 January 2007, due to work to repair cracks in the runways incoming flights even had

to circle over the airport or land at a military airfield nearby for refueling and temporary parking. In addition, up to 11 aerobridges were out of service as they were unreachable due to repair work.

Although many engineers agreed that drainage and subsurface water might be responsible for the ruts and cracks in the airport, they could not agree on the sources of the problematic water in the sand layer that had weakened the strength of the asphalt on the surface of the taxiways. The Ministry of Transport recommended temporarily reopening Don Muang while repair work on the runways at Suvarnabhumi proceeds. However, a two-week investigation led by Tortrakul Yomnak, a chief engineer for Airports of Thailand and a leader of the anti-Thaksin movement later found that the runway was safe, and that cracks could be repaired in as little as a few hours. Many fear that the junta-led investigations were unlikely to reveal an impartial picture of the airport's shortcomings. As became apparent at the beginning of the investigation, Tortrakul had warned that the airport might need to be closed for three years.

On 16 February, Thailand backtracked on a plan to turn Bangkok's shuttered Don Muang airport into a second international hub, one day after some 94 international airlines threatened to halt flights to Thailand if they were forced to move. Army-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont - in office since the military coup of September last year - said Don Muang would still re-open as a domestic airport, but backed down on a plan to move international flights there.

### Ongoing Politics

Asian news sources say that "outside analysts have also warned the military-backed government may be

inflating its claims in a political bid to discredit the regime of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in the September coup... Suvarnabhumi was one of Thaksin's pet projects, and the deposed leader had made the airport a personal crusade, and once camped at the building site in a show of support. One way of discrediting the Thaksin regime is by showing his big, pet project, Suvarnabhumi Airport, was wrecked not only by corruption but also incompetence"<sup>1</sup>

At the moment a discussion is ongoing whether Bangkok should have two airports operating or not. Fears are that operating both Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang would split passengers, airlines, the AoT's resources and will lead to lower cost-efficiency as well as inconvenience for passengers. "For Bangkok to be a strong aviation hub in the region, the long-term vision should still be to have a single airport operation," said Albert Tjoeng, a Singapore-based spokesman for the International Air Transport Association, the global airline industry group. Despite all criticism Suvarnabhumi is a modern gateway to Thailand making you feel welcome in the land of smile.

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> *International airlines worry over re-opening of Bangkok's old airport*, Channel News Asia 07 February 2007, [http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp\\_asia-pacific\\_business/view/257133/1/html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asia-pacific_business/view/257133/1/html)

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