

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-lax12aug12,0,4935910,full.story?coll=la-home-center>

From the Los Angeles Times

Computer glitch holds up 20,000 at LAX

Passengers are delayed for hours on planes and in terminals after a customs processing system goes down.

By Karen Kaplan, Rong-Gong Lin II and Ari B. Bloomekatz
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

August 12, 2007

More than 20,000 international passengers were stranded for hours at Los Angeles International Airport on Saturday, waiting on airplanes and in packed customs halls while a malfunctioning computer system prevented U.S. officials from processing the travelers' entry into the country.

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection system went down around 2 p.m., forcing some planes to sit on the tarmac for so long that workers had to refuel them to keep their power units and air conditioning running. Maintenance workers ran trucks around the airport hooking up tubes to service lavatories.

Just after midnight Saturday, Tom Winfrey, a spokesman for Los Angeles World Airports, said the computer system was up and running. As of 2 a.m., 377 passengers were still being processed. At 3:40 a.m., customs was still processing the last seven people — one passenger in a wheelchair and six crew members — all from the last flight to arrive early Sunday: Mexicana Airlines Flight 922 from Guadalajara, Mexico.

The last passengers cleared customs at 3:50 a.m. That did not include six travelers detained because of passport or agriculture questions.

"This is probably one of the worst days we've had. I've been with the agency for 30 years and I've never seen the system go down and stay down for as long as it did," said Peter Gordon, acting port director for customs.

The delays also jammed airport parking lots. As of 3 a.m., some lots were still completely gridlocked. The congestion was so bad that at 3:30 a.m., customs spokesman Michael D. Fleming said he opted to stay at the airport rather than try to head home to Irvine.

The computer system maintains a list of people who should be subject to secondary searches upon entering the country, explained Fleming. "The vast majority of people" do not pose a security threat, "but it only takes one," he said. "Obviously a lot of innocent folks have been detained, and it is regrettable."

The malfunction affected only LAX, and customs said it was willing to divert flights to LA/Ontario International Airport, San Diego International Airport/Lindbergh Field or

McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas. Later, Fleming said two flights had been diverted: An Alaska Airlines flight landed in San Diego and a Spirit Airlines flight from Mexico landed at Ontario.

Passengers who are scheduled to depart from LAX today were urged to contact their airlines before going to the airport.

Some of the delays rivaled the worst incidents of last winter, when severe weather left thousands of passengers languishing for up to nine hours on American Airlines and JetBlue planes. Sals Farsi, 39, his wife and three children spent seven hours waiting to get off a flight from Cabo San Lucas late Saturday night. They said they received formula for their 6-month-old when the captain radioed the terminal for it. "This was crazy," he said.

When passengers emerged from planes tired and bleary eyed, they found most restaurants in the Bradley terminal closed or running low on food. The few restaurants still open had long lines of 30-40 people waiting. Paul Gysels, 60, of San Francisco, was loading up on beef jerky and Hershey's chocolate bars at a news stand. He had just spent five hours on the tarmac after a flight from La Paz.

Even when he got off the flight, his troubles continued. He learned he had missed the last flight from L.A. to San Francisco. "Nobody's going to make it out of L..A. before me."

On a British Airways flight from London that had been stuck at its gate for more than three hours, passengers "actually are being very patient," said Ventura resident Mel Swope, who was returning with his wife, Judie, from their second home in Alet les Bains, France. Speaking from the plane, Swope added: "They're talking on cellphones to family and friends. But the natives are getting restless. People are missing connections."

Coffee, soft drinks and water helped mollify passengers aboard an Alaska Airlines flight from La Paz, Mexico.

"People are pretty positive about it — they realize these things happen," said Kelly Henderson, a high school math teacher from Lawndale who had been stuck on the tarmac for several hours. "Everyone's been behaving well."

But in the inspection area inside the Bradley terminal, an estimated 1,000 passengers quickly emptied the vending machines and no water was available for at least four hours, according to an airport employee. By the time water arrived, children and elderly passengers were lying on the floor showing signs of dehydration. Water fountains were not accessible due to renovations in the terminal, and the only air conditioning was provided by three industrial fans with limited range, he said.

Three people were transported to local hospitals after they fell ill from waiting so long in the terminals, according to the Los Angeles City Fire Dept.

The system serves five LAX terminals that handle incoming international flights, said

Nancy Castles, a spokeswoman for Los Angeles World Airports. Airport and customs officials offered conflicting numbers of how many people were affected by the computer malfunction. Winfrey, of the airport, said about 11,000 people were directly affected; customs officials put that number at 20,000.

By 10 p.m., customs officials estimated that 8,100 people were waiting on planes. Computers were functioning normally at three smaller terminals, but at Bradley, a backup system was running well below normal capacity.

Customs officials were processing about 1,500 incoming passengers an hour; normally they process 2,800.

By late evening, officials moved some passengers to domestic terminals while they waited to be processed through customs.

Airlines send customs a list of all the passengers bound for the U.S. on international flights, and the federal agency combs through those lists to see if any travelers have been flagged by the Department of Homeland Security for special screening. With the computers down, customs cannot access that list, Fleming said.

When passengers leave an international flight, they proceed through a hallway and must immediately get through customs before they can pick up their luggage at the baggage claim. There is limited access to benches or seats, and no gift shops or restaurants until passengers pass through customs.

Fleming said the stranded passengers were patient as customs worked to resolve the glitch.

"We've authorized carriers to bring food and water onto airlines to make passengers comfortable," Fleming said. "I've been told there's air conditioning."

Lancelot Barker, captain of Alaska Airlines Flight 211 from Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Mexico, said the passengers on his plane were still on board an hour and a half after it had arrived at 6:30 p.m. His plane was parked near a gate, and it was not allowed to open its doors, he said.

Barker said his flight attendants had already run out of food on the flight, and would run out of water at 8 p.m.

"People are just swapping stories, wandering around the aisles," Barker said. "A lot of cellphones are out. People are trying to find out what other people have heard."

But the conditions were deteriorating on the other planes, which had been stuck for as many as seven hours as of 8 p.m., according to radio traffic, Barker said.

"Some people are grumpy about it and others are taking it in stride," he said.

On one Alaska flight, workers were racing to find baby formula for an infant, Barker said.

Alaska operations were "passing the name of the formula" to other workers, who were trying to process it through customs, Barker said.

By keeping passengers on the plane, said American Airlines spokesman Tim Smith, "at least we can . . . offer them beverages and water, rather than just standing in line."

As late as 10:20 p.m., passengers arriving on an Eva Airlines flight from Mumbai were told they would probably have to stay on the tarmac for up to five hours, according to a passenger who e-mailed the Times from the plane.

Inside the chaotic Bradley terminal, hundreds of people were waiting outside the exit for detained incoming passengers. Dozens of limousine drivers held up signs, looking exhausted. No announcements were made about the delay.

Barbara and Mark Poliquin of San Juan Capistrano were among a throng of relatives waiting for at least 36 members of Orange County Boy Scout Troop 411, which had attended the World Boy Scout convention in London.

It was their son Benjamin's 15th birthday, so his mother held multicolored balloons inscribed "Happy Birthday" and "Welcome Home."

The Poliquins were told they would have to wait at least four hours beyond the flight's 6:30 p.m. arrival time.

"We're very happy there's a Daily Grill here," said Barbara Poliquin.

Shortly before 7 p.m., passenger Shaheen Chowdurij emerged with his wife and two children. They had arrived about 1:30 p.m. on Singapore Airlines and waited 90 minutes on the tarmac.

After deplaning, they waited for another half hour in a small room before authorities allowed all U.S. passport holders to exit through customs.

But the Chowdurijs, Houston residents who had been vacationing in Singapore, missed their connection to Texas. Told that the next available connection was Sunday morning at 7:20, they left to find a hotel.

"I wish this would not have happened," said Shaheen Chowdurij, 43. "But they did the best they could."

Customs employees extended their shifts to help process passengers.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, said Smith, the American Airlines spokesman, the system was "very, very slow or not working at all."

This is not the first time the computer system has malfunctioned, but it is certainly the longest, Fleming said.

karen.kaplan@latimes.com

ron.lin@latimes.com

ari.bloomekatz@latimes.com

Times staff writers Margot Roosevelt and Deborah Schoch contributed to this report.