Facilitation Section (FAL)

Advance Passenger Information (API)

Introduction

The notion of an API system was conceived by the Customs services of certain States, who had identified the need to address the increased risk posed by airline passengers in recent years, especially in regard to drug trafficking and other threats to national security. In some locations this need to enhance controls, combined with the growth of air passenger traffic, had begun to place a severe strain on the resources of Customs and Immigration, resulting in unacceptable delays in the processing of arriving passengers at airports. A system in which identification data on passengers could be sent to the authorities while the aircraft was in flight, to be processed against computer data bases before the passengers arrived, was envisioned as a means of addressing the twin objectives of better compliance and faster clearance of low-risk passengers.

Background

Article 29 of the Chicago Convention requires every aircraft engaged in international navigation to carry certain documents, including, for passengers, "a list of their names and places of embarkation and destination". Annex 9 specifies, in Standard 2.7, that *presentation* of the passenger manifest document shall not normally be required, and notes that if the *information* is required it should be limited to the data elements included in the prescribed format, i.e. names, places of embarkation and destination, and flight details.

It should be noted that the adoption of this Standard contemplated the passenger manifest as a paper document which would have to be typed or written and delivered by hand. Nevertheless the concept of a limitation on the amount of information to that which is essential to meet the basic objectives of safety, efficiency and regulatory compliance, is applicable to modern electronic data interchange systems such as API, in which additional (but not unlimited) data may be transmitted to the authorities in exchange for a more efficient clearance operation. It is widely recognized that in any system involving the exchange of information (automated or not), it is the collection of data which is the major expense. Increases in data collection requirements should result in benefits which exceed the additional costs. This principle was a central issue during the debate over API in the Tenth Session of the Facilitation Division (FAL/10) and the eventual adoption by FAL/11 of API systems as a Recommended Practice.(*)

It was in anticipation of reducing the cost of aircraft delays due to inordinately long passenger clearance times that some of the airlines in the United States agreed to test an API system, which may be briefly described as follows: Data on each passenger (as contained in the machine readable zone of the passport) is captured by the airline during the check-in process overseas, formatted by the airline's reservation/control system and transmitted to the centralized Customs system, where it is checked against inter-agency data bases and lookout lists. The results of these checks are then downloaded to the airport of arrival, where they are distributed to both Immigration and Customs. The accomplishment of this part of the process prior to arrival of the flight substantially reduces or eliminates the time-consuming data entry and computer processing required during the examination of each passenger from a flight on which API data was not transmitted.

As the airlines and control authorities progress in their refinement of the system and improvement of the system performance, passenger clearance times for trans-oceanic flights (which, prior to use of API, frequently involved delays in excess of two hours) have been reduced to averages well below the ICAO recommended goal of 45 minutes. In addition to this improvement in productivity, the control authorities have realized an enhancement of their enforcement efforts, due to the fact that receipt of information in

advance gives them more time to process the information on the passengers and make better decisions regarding their inspection targets and the appropriate level of control.

The recommendation of FAL/11 reflected support in principle for the use of API worldwide; however, it was also recognized that it may not be a solution in all cases and that some States may not be in a position to implement such systems. States and airport communities which are interested in establishing an API system are advised to consider the following issues.

API as an EDI system. API involves the electronic interchange of a limited number of data elements (identification details from the passport and basic flight information) between the computer system of the airline or origin state and the computer system of the destination state. *The new recommended practice does not contemplate the manual preparation of lists, teletype messages or documents containing additional information about the passengers.*

API as system for advance inspection. The purpose of API is not solely to provide the authorities with a complete manifest of passenger on board a flight. It is essential that the authorities have procedures and resources in place for examining this data and analyzing it to some extent before the flight arrives, so that the inspection time for the passengers after arrival may be reduced. If the authorities do not have the capability for such pre-arrival screening of passenger information, API is not a viable proposition.

Costs. An electronic data interchange system requires a considerable investment in computer hardware, software, and training of personnel on the part of both the operators and the control authorities. An electronically accessible data base is essential; if the State does not have one it must first establish one. Operators and control authorities can expect to incur the costs of developing their respective computer systems and establishing communications links in order to enable the capture, transmission, receipt and processing of the requisite data. In some cases airport facilities may need to be modified in order to accommodate the API passengers separately from the others.

Impact of a new procedure. Although Article 22 of the Chicago Convention obligates States to facilitate international air navigation and adopt all measures to prevent unnecessary delays, Article 13 requires the aviation community to comply with a State's laws and regulations " ... related to entry, clearance, immigration, passports, customs, and quarantine... ". In operational terms, a new procedure connected with the arrival or departure of a flight can be justified if it serves to improve productivity of operations and if it improves compliance with the above-mentioned laws and/or enhances aviation security. API systems can effectively address AVSEC and national security problems, unacceptably long delays in passenger processing, and a deterioration of enforcement efforts due to scarcity of personnel resources. The costs of introducing a system should be weighed against the severity of these problems in the State or airport concerned.

Multiple causes of passenger processing delays. It should be recognized that not all of the time spent between disembarkation and final clearance is attributable to the activities of the border clearance agencies. Inefficient baggage handling, unavailability of jetways and ground transport, and long walking distances from the aircraft to the inspection hall are some of the factors which contribute to delays but which cannot be solved by the institution of an API system. A careful analysis, to determine how much of the excessive passenger clearance time is due to inspection processes, is necessary in order to decide whether an API system would be an appropriate strategy.

Multiple inspection agencies. If the decision is made to pursue an API system, it is essential to involve all of the inspection agencies in the planning and development of the system from the beginning. Customs, immigration, and agriculture authorities all have different information needs which must be accommodated, in order to prevent the non-participation of one of the agencies from negating the productivity gains of the others.

Industry involvement. Since participation in API involves costs to the operators, their co-

operation is most effectively obtained when participation is voluntary. It is not the intent of new systems that operators who do not participate or who make errors should be subject to punitive measures, although it is contemplated that passengers arriving on operators who do not participate may take longer to clear. In order to promote a harmonious, productive working relationship between operators and authorities, the new system should be allowed to sell itself on the basis of its merits.

Total airport process. API systems, to be successful, require the participation and co-operation of all parties to the passenger inspection process. The continued development of API should be a prominent item on the agenda of the Airport Facilitation Committee.

*** Recommended Practice. —** *Where appropriate, Contracting States should introduce a system of Advance Passenger Information (API), which involves the capture of passport details prior to departure and the transmission of the details by electronic means tothe authorities in the destination country, and in doing so should follow the joint World Customs Organization (WCO) /International Air Transport Association (IATA) Guideline on Advance Passenger Information, except that the data elements to be transmitted as set forth in the Guideline should also include the nationality of the passport holder expressed in the form of the Alpha-3 Codes specified in ICAO Doc 9303. To avoid extra handling time during check-in, the use of document reading devices to capture the information in machine readable travel documents should be encouraged.*