

Aeroflot makes it to Hongkong after 20 years

By STEPHEN WARD

THE Russians finally came to Kai Tak yesterday as an Aeroflot aircraft touched down in Hongkong for the first time, some 17 minutes late and nearly 20 years after the airline initially applied for landing rights in the territory.

Instead of Aeroflot's old winged hammer and sickle emblem, Flight SU593 carried the pre-revolution Russian eagle symbol as it landed at 12.22 pm.

The arrival of one of the airline's first Western-built Airbus 310-300s marked the beginning of a weekly direct service between Moscow and Hongkong.

Mr Leonid Seliverstov, director of international relations in the air transport department of Russia's transport ministry, said at a post-flight news conference Aeroflot had first applied to fly direct to Hongkong in the mid-1970s.

Explaining why it had taken so long to finally touch down here, Mr Seliverstov said in English he thought

"it was not good world at time [in the mid-1970s]. The order in the world was very suspicious".

But he said former president Mr Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost had altered all that: "Our world is changed."

A deal allowing Aeroflot to fly to Hongkong had been struck with British authorities shortly before the break-up of the old Soviet empire.

"We have concluded agreement with British authorities up till 1997," Mr Seliverstov said, adding that Aeroflot would have to strike a new deal for landing rights with China after the transfer of sovereignty.

The delegation aboard the flight also included staff from the Central Management of International Air Communication.

They will meet aviation industry leaders as well as Hongkong customs, immigration and Civil Aviation Department officials during a week-long visit.

Aeroflot's Russian-made Ilyushins and Tupolevs are reportedly banned from Kai Tak because they do not meet Civil Aviation Department regulations.

But the airline's first deputy commercial director, Mr Pavel Rozhkov, said the Airbus 310-300 was more suitable for flights to Hongkong.

Mr Rozhkov said a new Aeroflot-Russian International Airlines was in the process of being established. Other republics were developing their own airline structures, he said.

Aeroflot is looking at expanding the new once-a-

week Moscow-Hongkong service to four times weekly, and is also considering flights between the territory and the city of Khabarovsk, north of Vladivostok.

About 50 passengers were on the flight and about the same number went back with Flight SU594 to Moscow yesterday afternoon, the airline's local sales agency, Global Union Express, said.

The service is due to leave Moscow at 10 pm every Saturday, spend 10½ hours in the air, and then touch down at Kai Tak at 12.05 pm before flying back at 4.10 pm.

The new service follows

the relaxation of visa restrictions for citizens of the former Soviet Union.

Mr Rozhkov said Hongkong people were able to get visas when they landed in Moscow or they could apply in other Asian cities which had official Russian representation.

The director of the new Aeroflot-Russian International Airlines, Mr Victor Kuskov, said passengers on new European flights had been impressed with Aeroflot's standard of service.

"The service differed greatly from that produced by Aeroflot earlier and we are going to improve it."