

31 May 1990

13 nations lined up for airline accords

THE Government is negotiating with 13 countries for separate air service agreements.

The acting Secretary for Economic Services, Rafael Hui, told the Legislative Council yesterday that since the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984, Hongkong had made four such agreements - with the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada and Brunei.

Previously, the British government handled all air service talks relating to Hongkong.

According to the Joint Declaration, the Hongkong Special Administrative Region Government will be able to conclude air agreements after 1997.

But to ensure a smooth

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

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transition, the Hongkong Government is pursuing separate agreements with its aviation partners before 1997.

Replying to a question from legislator Martin Lee, Mr Hui said the fifth agreement was expected to be signed within the next few weeks.

And five more draft agreements had been negotiated and would be signed once the usual procedures had been completed.

"Negotiations with seven other countries have begun and are at various stages of progress," he said.

"It is expected that negotiations for ASAs with Hongkong's remaining air services partners will take place as and when opportunities present themselves."

Mr Hui said the Government had a busy negotiation programme covering the whole year. Usually a round of talks were held before final texts were agreed.

"We are keen to speed up the programmes," he said.

Mr Hui declined to name the partner countries in the negotiations, saying confidence was needed.

He said it was not appropriate for Hongkong to conclude a separate agreement with the Britain before 1997.

"All Hongkong ASAs negotiated to date have been designed with the relevant provisions of the Joint Declaration in mind and are capable of remaining in force after 1997," he said.

"The conclusion of these ASAs will therefore lay the foundation for a smooth transition."

As agreed by the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group in 1986, the Chinese government would be given texts of the concluded agreements.

In some instances, the partner countries needed constitutional approvals before the agreements could be concluded.