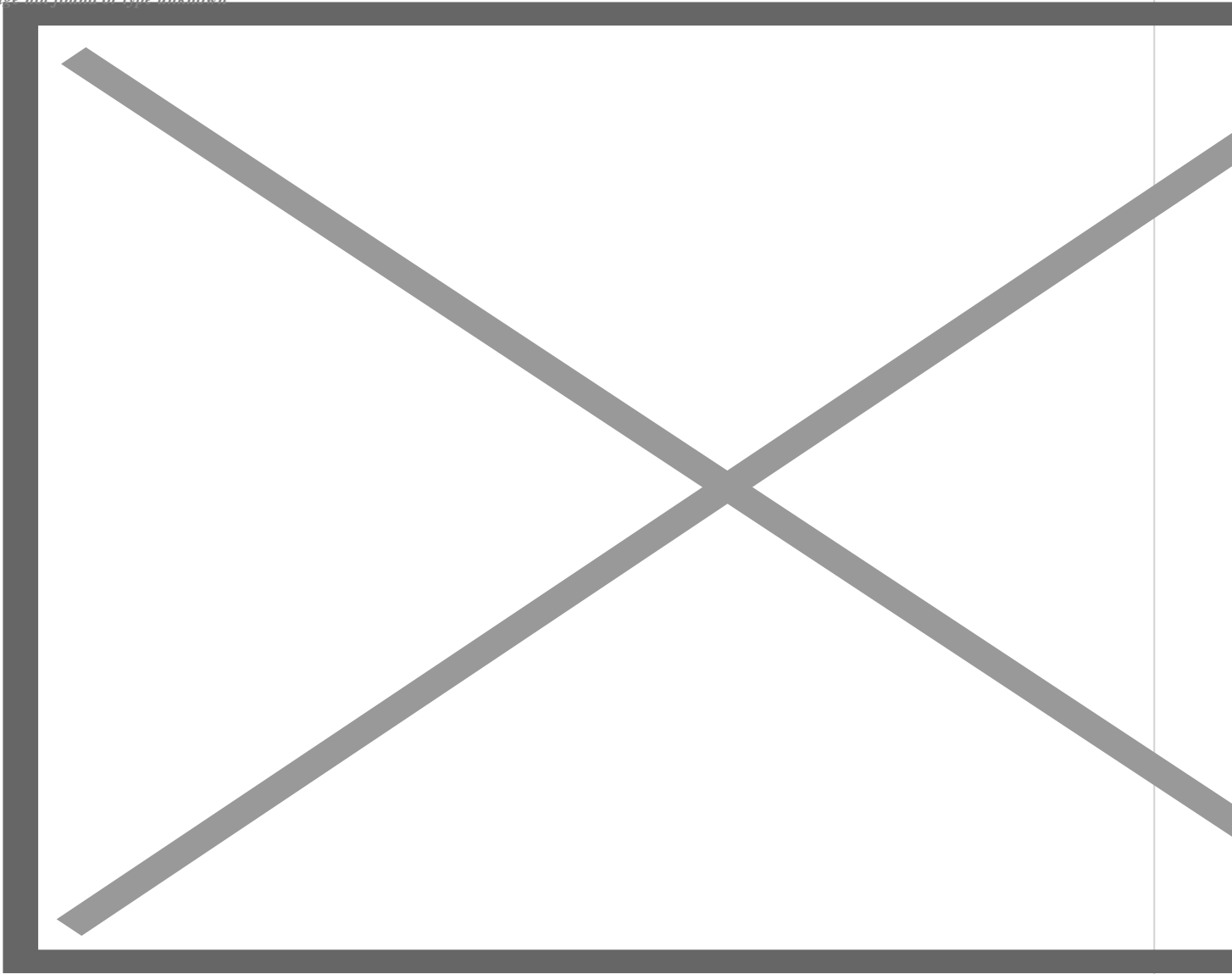


U.S. preparing for a spike in summer domestic air travel

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Sunday saw the highest daily total of passengers at US airports since March 2020 [File: Kamil Krzaczynski/Reuters]

New York, May 26 (RHC)-- U.S. airlines and agencies are preparing for increased domestic air travel this summer even as the government continues to debate whether to allow more foreign travellers to visit.

Shares in American Airlines, United Airlines and Delta Air Lines were sharply higher on Tuesday after top executives said the pace of a leisure travel recovery was increasing. "We've been very, very pleased with the pace of demand recovery," Delta President Glen Hauenstein told an industry conference. "Bookings have been better than expected."

As more Americans pass through airports, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) plans to hire another 1,000 officers by July 4th -- a peak U.S. travel period -- after hiring 3,000 officers since January 1st.

"We have already seen a sharp rise at the nation's airports and will continue to experience steady increases throughout the summer," Acting TSA Administrator Darby LaJoye told a news conference at Reagan National Airport outside Washington, DC. The TSA screened 1.86 million passengers on Sunday, the highest daily total since March 2020.

United said it now expects its adjusted earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation to be positive in the third quarter and trimmed its forecast for a decline in unit revenue in the current quarter.

And American is seeing "encouraging signs" in business and international travel, which have been hit hard during the pandemic, Chief Financial Officer Derek Kerr said. The improvements come as more Americans become vaccinated, companies prepare for workers to return to offices and travel, and as more countries open their borders.

However, the United States continues to bar the entry of nearly all non-US citizens from most of Europe, South Africa, India, China, Iran and Brazil, despite pressure from travel groups to lift restrictions.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said at the press conference the government is "following the facts, the data, the science in making the decision as to when business, international travel actually can resume... This is something we are evaluating each and every day." The administration has held extensive meetings on the topic, officials have told Reuters, but made no decisions.

Industry officials think Biden could lift the restriction on the United Kingdom and Ireland as soon as early June. COVID-19 cases in both countries have declined. Roger Dow, president and CEO of the US Travel Association, told Reuters "the UK is the furthest along. Our belief is, if we can open UK, the rest follows."

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