

# A year of coronavirus and cargo-only passenger flights

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It has now been more than a year since the air cargo sector first began to feel the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A quick search through the *Air Cargo News* archive reveals that the first reports of the outbreak having an impact on the industry were in January.

At that stage reports centred on [airlines cutting services to the city of Wuhan](#) — the epicentre of the outbreak — and wider Hubei Province and the effect this would have on supply chains.

However, as the seriousness of the situation became clear, flights to China were soon being cut, while factories were being closed and production lines ground to a halt.

Even at that stage, many believed that the situation would soon ease and [there was an expectation that air cargo would be in high demand as the re-opening of factories created a surge in demand](#).

Instead, the situation got worse. Passenger networks around the world began to be grounded and freighter operators had to deal with a constantly changing regulatory landscape with extra rules, regulations and quarantine measures coming into force.

As the world got back on its feet and began taking steps to deal with the outbreak, the air cargo industry was called into action to transport vital personal protective equipment, medical equipment and keep supply chains moving.

It was in late February/early March last year that supply chains in Asia began to re-open — following an extended Chinese New Year holiday break – and the lack of bellyhold space began to have a [clear impact on the market as prices surged](#).

Figures from TAC Index on March 17 2020 show that average airfreight rates on services from Shanghai to the US increased by 29.7% on the prior week to reach \$4.71 per kg. On services from Shanghai to Europe there was a 17.7% week on week increase to \$3.19 per kg.

The increase in prices this time last year can also be seen in rates from Baltic Airfreight Index released this week, which show a narrowing of year-on-year increases, reflecting a jump in prices a year-ago.

It was also around this time last year that airlines began to launch all-cargo passenger operations to make-up for the shortfall in bellyhold capacity.

United Cargo marked the anniversary of its first cargo-only passenger flight on March 19.

The flight operated from Chicago O'Hare to Frankfurt carrying 29,000 pounds of cargo.

A year later, the airline has operated more than 11,000 cargo-only flights carrying more than 570m pounds of freight, including more than 113m pounds of medical and pharmaceutical products on both cargo-only and passenger flights as well as approximately 10m Covid-19 vaccines.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, we knew we were uniquely positioned to utilize our widebody aircraft and our network to keep commodities moving, so we quickly mobilised various departments throughout the airline to launch a cargo-

only network of flights that would keep commodities moving,” said United Cargo president Jan Krems.

Emirates SkyCargo began its cargo-only passenger operation on March 16 when a Boeing B777-300ER passenger aircraft took off from Dubai and flew to Kuwait carrying only 34 tonnes of cargo.

It was the first time that Emirates had operated a cargo only flight on a passenger aircraft and came just four days after Covid-19 had been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Since then, the carrier has operated more than 27,800 cargo flights carrying more than 100,000 tonnes.

Nabil Sultan, Emirates’ divisional senior vice president, cargo, said: “It has been exactly one year since what was considered impossible in the air cargo industry became not just a reality but a strong operational pillar for Emirates SkyCargo.

“Prior to the pandemic, nearly two thirds of our total cargo was transported in the bellyhold of our passenger flights. With increasing flight suspensions and restrictions on passenger travel imposed due to Covid-19 in early March 2020, we could foresee a situation where there would no longer be adequate cargo capacity available in the market to transport essential supplies.

“In order to bolster the cargo capacity offered by our 11 Boeing 777 freighters and make sure that we could meet the urgent demand for goods such as PPE, ventilators and other pharmaceutical goods and food supplies from across the world, we proactively made a radical and innovative plan to utilise our widebody passenger aircraft to operate cargo only flights.

“We trialled this passenger freighter concept with a flight to Kuwait on March 16 last year. Over the next few weeks, as regular passenger operations were completely suspended, we started increasing our passenger freighter flights to a point where we had close to 90 passenger aircraft being used for cargo operations.”