

INTERVIEW

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Paul Abela

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## Higher passenger tax to blame for drop in Maltese travellers

Kurt Sansone

Malta International Airport is expected to register zero growth in passenger movements for 2005 as statistics clearly point towards a drastic drop in Maltese travellers in the second half of the year when the higher passenger departure tax kicked in, Business Today can reveal.

Analysing passenger figures published by the National Statistics Office, it is amply clear that since August, when the higher tax became effective, MIA registered drops ranging from 17.9 per cent to 36.3 per cent in the number of Maltese travellers

passing through its gates.

August 2005 saw a drop of 30 per cent in Maltese travellers over the same number of travellers a year before. The decline in Maltese travellers persisted for the rest of the year with October seeing a steep drop of 36.3 per cent.

The passenger departure tax was doubled to Lm20 in the budget for 2005, a move which was heavily criticised by travel operators.

Statistics show that up to November last year MIA saw 20,279 less Maltese passenger pass through its gates when compared to the same period in 2004. ▶ page 6



Maltese travellers turning their back on air travel

## GRTU turmoil persists as three council members resign

James Debono

The Chamber for Small and Medium Enterprises- GRTU is still in disarray despite President Paul Abela's last ditch attempt to find a solution to the rift that developed between council members over the appointment of the organisation's top officials.

Abela had proposed that any

council member wanting to serve as vice president should be appointed in that role.

But this proposal was described as "ridiculous" by GRTU council member Hubert Agius who resigned from his role as vice president after disagreeing with the method used to elect the GRTU's seven officials.

"Just imagine how ridiculous it would be if the Prime Minister

where to appoint all 35 MPs on the government bench as his Ministers in order to please everyone," Hubert Agius told Business Today yesterday.

Speaking to the Times on Monday, President Paul Abela quashed rumours that the GRTU was facing internal strife.

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## Taxis reform will not lead to lower prices

James Debono

The reform unveiled last Saturday aimed at regulating the white taxi service will not bring a significant reduction in prices according to the ministry for transport.

Expressing his disappointment on the reform, economist Edward Scicluna told Business Today (see page 3) that it is "unpardonable that so much energy could be spent on planning and undertaking a reform which does not deliver the basics: cost and price reduction."

The reform will also not permit the issue of new licences in what remains a closed shop restricted to the present owners of white taxis.

To encourage limited competition, government will however allow a new service provided by electric taxis to compete with white taxis in "certain areas."

"Prices for white taxi trips are expected to remain at the same levels of today or in certain cases be marginally cheaper," a spokesperson for the ministry for transport and urban development told Business Today. ▶ page 6

## Austin Gatt in Lisbon meeting with Bill Gates

Austin Gatt, currently in Lisbon attending Microsoft's government leaders' forum, will this morning be meeting the global giant's chairman and chief software architect Bill Gates to discuss furthering the relationship between government and Microsoft.

Gatt and Gates are expected to discuss the extension of digital literacy and the adoption of ICT in education and the strengthening of employability for workers in the manufacturing industry through information technology.

The issue of access to upcoming technologies for students at beneficial pricing levels is also expected to be on the agenda for this morning's meeting.

Gatt, yesterday also met Jean Phillip Courtois, president of Microsoft International but no information was available on the outcome of the meeting. A ministry spokesperson told Business Today that government and Microsoft will be making an announcement on the agreed initiatives in the coming weeks.

Government entered into the first agreement with Microsoft in February 2003. The highlight of the agreement was the avail-



File photo of Gatt and Gates, the two meet again

ability of the source-code for the local industry and the heavily reduced rates for software packages for local students.

The agreement was reiterated in June 2004 and Microsoft was roped in to assist in the setting up of the community training learning centres among other initiatives.

Microsoft had revenues of USD36.8 billion for the fiscal year ending June 2004 and employs more than 55,000 people in 85 countries and regions around the world.

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