

Volcanic ash cloud leaves hundreds of thousands stranded in Europe

Our correspondent
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A new ash cloud from a volcanic eruption in Iceland appeared headed toward Europe Monday evening, creating further disruptions in airline traffic. The ash cloud has already created havoc for European economies and stranded hundreds of thousands of passengers.

The intensification of ash from the Eyjafjallajökull volcano underscored the reckless character of demands from airlines to resume flights quickly. As a result of this pressure, European governments outlined plans on Monday to restart at least some service Tuesday morning.

However, the British National Air Traffic Control Services said in a statement Monday night that the new ash cloud “demonstrates the dynamic and rapidly changing conditions in which we are working.” While it had earlier said air traffic in Scotland would resume at 3:30 p.m. London time on Tuesday, its new statement said any resumption of flights “is uncertain, due to the new ash cloud.”

The ban on flights has been imposed because the volcanic ash, which contains high levels of fine silica, can seize or stall the engines of planes flying through the cloud. In 1989, a new Boeing 747 operated by Dutch national carrier KLM nearly crashed after the plane flew through a volcanic ash plume in Alaska.

Hundreds of thousands of passengers have been left stranded in airports across the continent, either unable to depart for their destination or return from holidays and business trips. Millions more have been forced to cancel or reschedule their flights.

Stranded passengers are facing nightmare scenarios, left to fend for themselves with little or no help from government authorities or airlines. They have resorted to sleeping at airports or paying for hotel rooms. Many

passengers reported that hotels were sharply increasing rates for rooms due to the surge in demand. Other travelers are missing work and paychecks due to the cancellation of flights.

Busi Daniel, a French tourist stranded in Hong Kong, told the Associated Press, “Yesterday, we had a hotel room at 250 euros. At midday, it was €460, and in the evening, the price was €800 for a room—we can’t pay that.”

It is unknown how long the erupting volcano will last. On Sunday evening, the Brussels-based air traffic body, Eurocontrol, said that 19,000 out of 24,000 flights were cancelled on that day, with airspace partly or fully closed in 17 EU countries. Since Thursday, more than 100,000 flights have been cancelled throughout Europe.

While airports have been closed across Europe, Britain has been especially affected, with services halted at Heathrow, one of the world’s busiest airports. The British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced that his government would mobilise two Royal Navy vessels, including the Ark Royal aircraft carrier, to help stranded Britons to return.

The disruption to air services has extended well beyond the borders of Europe. Among the Asian carriers that cancelled their flights to Europe on Monday were Cathay Pacific, Qantas, Japan Airlines, Korean Air, Air New Zealand, Thai Airways and China Airlines of Taiwan. Many flights from the US to Europe have also been cancelled. The crisis has also disrupted international airfreight traffic and has already had considerable political repercussions.

According to industry analysts, the current chaotic situation in European air space already exceeds the disastrous disruptions following Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The shutdown of airports across Europe has caused

dramatic losses in revenue for the airline industry, estimated at \$200 million per day. Shares of a number of European and international airlines have fallen in recent days, and the crisis could wipe out weaker air carriers if it continues much longer.

According to the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, “The total cost for the aviation industry (airlines, airports, suppliers, freight operators, handlers, etc.) could be well over \$2 billion.”

Meteorologists are agreed about the potential danger arising from the volcanic dust cloud. On Sunday, a leading US official reported that a NATO F-16 fighter had been damaged after flying through the cloud.

Nevertheless, airlines have responded to the loss of revenue by ramping up pressure to lift the ban on flights, accusing European governments of overreacting to the threat. On Sunday Wolfgang Mayrhuber, the CEO of Germany’s Lufthansa, Europe’s largest airline dismissed concerns about passenger safety as unfounded.

Mayrhuber told the German television station ZDF that airlines had conducted their own test flights, and, after studying the ash cloud, they came to the conclusion that “there is no risk.”

Germany industrial leaders have also called for the ban on night flights and freight transport to be suspended in order to minimise damage to the economy.

Airline leaders are also calling upon governments to compensate companies for their losses. In a statement, the CEO of British Airway Willie Walsh said, “There is a precedent for this to happen as compensation was paid after the closure of US airspace following the terrorist events of 9/11, and clearly the impact of the current situation is more considerable.”

Another airline executive speaking up in favour of resuming flights was the Austrian head of Lauda Air, Niki Lauda. Describing the ban as the “biggest scandal in air transport history.” Lauda declared that he had personally flown in an Airbus A320 through what he termed the “so-called cloud” and had witnessed no damage to the plane. He went on to demand that responsibility for passenger security be transferred from national transport ministers to the airlines themselves. “That will put an end to the whole nonsense,” he told the television channel N24.

The airline industry group International Air Transport

Association, criticized the “lack of leadership” by European governments in the face of the aviation shutdown.

Referring to the video conference on Monday by European Union transport ministers, IATA CEO Giovanni Bisignani told the Associated Press, “It’s embarrassing, and a European mess.... It took five days to organize a conference call with the ministers of transport, and we are losing \$200 million per day (and 750,000 passengers are stranded all over. Does it make sense?” Bisignani also said that Europe is “not well-equipped” when it comes to planes that can test the air quality in the skies.

The current crisis has certainly exposed the complete lack of coordination between European governments in the case of such a crisis. However, a transfer of passenger safety from national transport agencies to the profit orientated private airlines, in the manner suggested by Lauda, would have disastrous repercussions for passenger safety.

European air travellers are already paying the price for the deregulation of European air traffic, which began in the 1990s. Following the decision of the European Commission at the end of that decade to establish a uniform European air space (European Single Sky), airports and air traffic control agencies have been systematically drawn into the ever-fiercer competitive struggle between airlines.

The main priority of restructuring the continent’s air space has not been to improve security, but rather to reduce costs and increase the competitiveness of air traffic control companies. The result has been reduced personnel, increasing workloads and declining budgets for necessary technical equipment.



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