

Moscow air transport collapse



Last year was exceptional for weather extremes in Moscow, culminating in a severe ice storm that paralysed the capital's airports, writes **Lina Kolesnikova**

IN FEBRUARY 2010, MOSCOW WAS HIT by a massive snowstorm. In the summer, it suffered from an extreme heat wave (average temperature +39 Celsius – see *CRJ* 6:3). December 2010, however, brought heavy freezing rain.

This is a rare natural occurrence when the temperature 1.5 km up in the atmosphere is much higher than at ground level. When rain falls, it turns to ice upon hitting the ground, coating tree branches and electrical

wires and cables with layers of heavy ice.

About 12,000 trees and nine power supply line supports collapsed after being coated with ice, leaving tens of thousands of inhabitants in Moscow without electricity – and in some cases without heating – for weeks.

Serious disruption between Moscow and Nizhny-Novgorod (Russia's third largest city) paralysed rail traffic between the two regions.

Moscow's three airports were badly affected with Domodedovo, Russia's largest airport

People were tired, hungry and angry. Hotel rooms were not provided, queues for the free meals – which comprised tea and two chocolate bars – were extremely long. There was no pharmacy open in the airport, making it impossible to buy medicine or hygiene products

photoshot

(see p4) and Sheremetyevo experiencing a total collapse in services. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the weekend of December 25-26 was the start of the winter holidays in Russia. Thousands of Muscovites, and other Russians who use Moscow's airports as transfer hubs, were leaving for other countries or heading to popular Russian destinations.

Hundreds of flights were cancelled or delayed, stranding about 20,000 passengers.

On December 26, managers of Domodedovo

announced that the airport was experiencing an unprecedented situation as it had no energy supplies for its facilities – external power supplies to all airport infrastructure had been lost. The Russian Aviation Service asked passengers to avoid the airport.

Some passengers were transferred to Sheremetyevo Airport, which also began to experience problems in dealing with the increased number of flights.

Meanwhile, passengers continued to arrive, either in transit, or those who had not checked the situation before leaving for the airports.

On December 26, Domodedovo delayed more than 100 flights and Sheremetyevo more than 60. Many passengers found themselves in an awkward situation – they were stuck.

Those who lived in Moscow could not leave the airport because express trains wouldn't work without electricity and a traffic jam of several kilometres stretched back down the highway. Those who did decide to return home had to walk several kilometres, with their cases, to a road where they could find taxis. Travel agencies could not provide updated information and a hotline number was of limited use.

ATMs were out of action, so passengers could not withdraw cash. There were no hot meals available at the airport and it was unwise to buy cold food because the refrigerators had stopped working. Airline representatives did not staff the counters because they were afraid of being asked questions that they could not answer.

That Sunday evening, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin held an urgent meeting with leading ministries (EMERCOM of Russia, Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Energy) to discuss the response to the situation. Partial electricity supply to Domodedovo was restored late that evening and EMERCOM of Russia delivered three diesel generator sets.

But the situation deteriorated further the next day. Russia's largest air company Aeroflot, which is based at Sheremetyevo, said that it had used up its monthly stocks of de-icing fluid in the previous three days. This information was not relayed to travellers and people were not told about the long delays. Airport information boards provided limited or sometimes controversial advice. People were still arriving and, because of a lack of seating, were sitting on the floor. When the floor became packed, people stood on the stairs.

Although the company knew that the de-icing fluid had to be brought in from Germany, Aeroflot promised to start departure processes as soon as possible, a decision that contributed hugely to further development of the crisis. If people had known that the

delays would be for days, most would have returned home to await further information.

In the evening, the atmosphere turned ugly at the overcrowded airport – people were tired, hungry and angry. Hotel rooms were not provided, queues for the free meals – which comprised tea and two chocolate bars – were extremely long. There was no pharmacy

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open in the airport, making it impossible to buy medicine or hygiene products.

Throughout Sunday the toilets experienced running water and plumbing problems. Bottled water supplies were sold out. The ventilation system's were not working and this, along with the general overcrowding, affected air quality and smell. However, a duty-free store remained open selling cheap alcohol.

At both airports, passengers started to express nervousness and demanded meetings with air company representatives. The airports reacted by calling in police civil unrest units.

On Monday, December 27, Domodedovo was dimly lit, the entrance and exit bars to the airport did not work; luggage carousels and escalators remained motionless.

According to passengers at Domodedovo there was also a problem with air conditioning. People who had passed through passport control were trapped airside at the departure gates. Smokers began to light up inside the building because they could not leave the enclosed space. Tired after two days waiting, some people were in hysterics. Other passengers with health problems who had left their medication in their suitcases to comply with hand luggage security regulations on liquids, began to panic.

On Tuesday, there were scuffles between airport officials and passengers in Sheremetyevo's Terminal D who had been redirected to several different gates, only to be denied boarding repeatedly. They staged a sit-in and smashed clothing bins at security checkpoints. Security staff changed into plain clothes after the incident to avoid provoking new assaults.

The experience prompted the Head of the Russian Parliament's Transport Committee to initiate the scrutiny of new bill in draft form

on: *Airports and activities in airports in the Russian Federation*. He said that existing laws were obviously deficient as there were no clear legal definitions – or delineation – of rules and responsibilities for airport and airport operators. "We see today that the existing laws allow officials, airport operators and carriers to lay the blame on each other, and we cannot find the last one in line," he said.

This incident showed that the management of Russia's largest airports and airlines did not function in, nor respond to, the crisis situation effectively. The official response showed a lack of co-ordination between agencies and companies. Questions remain as to why simple actions were not taken, such as providing stranded passengers with food, water and transport back to the city. Airports and airline staff failed to provide even basic assistance or information about changes in flight schedules.

Minister of Transport Igor Levitin held a special conference on Aeroflot's management during the airport collapse. He insisted that the main error was the absence of a temporary flight schedule. As a result passengers were not given updated information about their own flights. Foreign air companies which use Sheremetyevo were able to inform their passengers about flight delays.

MEASURES

The Minister demanded that the Boards of Directors of Sheremetyevo and Aeroflot reconsider crisis management tools to ensure such mistakes are not repeated in the future. Domodedovo Airport is owned by a private company. None of its top officials made any public statements during the crisis, though the airport's director issued a plea for help to government agencies on Monday, December 27.

The transport public prosecutor's office has instituted five proceedings against air companies (Aeroflot among them) accusing them of ignoring their responsibilities to customers. Passengers should be provided with free shelter, food and drink. Those with children are entitled to special attention.

An unprecedented multimillion-dollar lawsuit against carriers and airports on behalf of stranded passengers is being prepared by some lawyers in Moscow.

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