

Iceland's volcanic ash halts flights across Europe

April 15 2010, By ROBERT BARR , Associated Press Writer



In this image made available by the Icelandic Coastguard taken Wednesday April 14, 2010, smoke and steam rises from the volcano under the Eyjafjallajökull glacier in Iceland, which erupted for the second time in less than a month, melting ice, shooting smoke and steam into the air and forcing hundreds of people to flee rising floodwaters. Authorities evacuated 800 residents from around the glacier as rivers rose by up to 10 feet (3 meters). Emergency officials and scientists said the eruption under the ice cap was 10 to 20 times more powerful than one last month, and carried a much greater risk of widespread flooding.(AP Photo/Icelandic Coastguard, ho)

(AP) -- Ash clouds from Iceland's spewing volcano disrupted air traffic across Northern Europe on Thursday as authorities closed British and Nordic air space, shut down Europe's busiest airport at Heathrow and

canceled hundreds of flights.

Britain's Civil Aviation Authority said non-emergency flights would be banned until at least 6 p.m. (1700 GMT, 1 p.m. EDT). Irish authorities also closed their air space for eight hours.

London Heathrow, Europe's business airport, handles upwards of 1,200 flights and 180,000 passengers per day. The closure also affected London's second- and third-largest airports, Gatwick and Stansted. It was not immediately clear when flights would resume.

With the major trans-Atlantic hub at Heathrow closed, dozens of flights to the United States were on hold, and cancelations spread across the continent to major hubs at Brussels, Amsterdam, Geneva and Paris, where flights heading north were canceled until midnight.

In Iceland, hundreds of people have fled rising floodwaters since the [volcano](#) under the Eyjafjallajokull (ay-yah-FYAH'-plah-yer-kuh-duhl) glacier erupted Wednesday for the second time in less than a month. As water gushed down the mountainside, rivers rose up to 10 feet (3 meters) by Wednesday night.

The [ash](#) cloud has not disrupted operations at Iceland's Keflavik airport or caused problems in the capital of Reykjavik, but has affected the southeastern part of the island, said meteorologist Thorsteinn Jonsson. In one area, visibility was reduced to 150 yards (meters) this morning, he said, and farmers were advised to keep livestock indoors to protect them from eating ash particles as sharp as glass.

The volcano was sending up smoke and ash that posed "a significant safety threat to aircraft," Britain's National [Air Traffic](#) Service said, as visibility is compromised and debris can get sucked into airplane engines.

Emirates airline canceled 10 roundtrip flights between Dubai and Britain on Thursday because of the ash cloud.

"I think I might cry," said Ann Cochrane, 58, of Toronto, one of the passengers stranded in Glasgow. "I just wish I was on a beach in Mexico."

In northern Sweden all air traffic was suspended, affecting the cities of Skelleftea, Lulea, Kiruna and Hemavan, the national aviation authority said.

Air traffic in northern Finland was also halted.

Norway's King Harald V and Queen Sonja - who had planned to fly Thursday to Copenhagen for the Danish queen's 70th birthday - were looking to take a "car, boat or train." A canceled trans-Atlantic flight left Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg grounded in New York.

The U.S. Geological Survey said about 100 encounters of aircraft with volcanic ash were documented from 1983 to 2000; in some cases engines shut down briefly after sucking in volcanic debris, but there have been no fatal incidents.

In 1989, a KLM Royal Dutch Airlines Boeing 747 flew into an [ash cloud](#) from Alaska's Redoubt volcano and lost all power, dropping from 25,000 feet to 12,000 feet (7,500 meters to 3,600) before the crew could get the engines restarted. The plane landed safely.

In another incident in the 1980s, a British Airways 747 flew into a dust cloud and the grit sandblasted the windscreen. The pilot had to look out a side window to land safely.

Volcanic ash is formed from explosive eruptions. Particles as hard as a

knife blade range in size from as small as 0.001 millimeters (1/25,000 inch) to 2 millimeters (1/12 inch), the Geological Survey says.

Ash can melt in the heat of an aircraft engine and then solidify again, disrupting the mechanics, the agency says.

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