

Flights suspended again at London Gatwick after drone report

December 21 2018, by Gregory Katz



An EasyJet plane on its final approach before landing at Gatwick airport near London, Friday Dec. 21, 2018. Flights resumed at London's Gatwick Airport on Friday morning after drones sparked the shutdown of the airfield for more than 24 hours, leaving tens of thousands of passengers stranded or delayed during the busy holiday season. (John Stillwell/PA via AP)

In a new nightmare for holiday travel, flights were suspended again at London's Gatwick Airport after reports that another drone had been

spotted over the airport late Friday afternoon, the airport and British police said.

A new drone was reportedly seen around 5:10 p.m. at Britain's second-busiest airport, which operates 30 miles (45 kilometers) south of London.

Incoming planes circled over Gatwick because they could not land and outgoing planes were kept on the tarmac while the drone report was investigated.

Airport officials tweeted that takeoffs and landing were stopped "as a precaution." It was not known how long the airport shutdown would last.

The suspected new drone sighting came after British police and transport officials had said that extra measures had been put in place to prevent drones from intruding on the airport.

The motive for the drone invasion wasn't clear but British police said there were no indications it was "terror related."

Gatwick had only just reopened about 11 hours earlier after having been shut down all day Thursday and part of Wednesday night when authorities said drones repeatedly violated the airport perimeter, threatening the safety of incoming and outgoing planes.

The Thursday shutdown at Gatwick threw tens of thousands of passengers into massive travel chaos, since about 110,000 people had been scheduled to pass through the airport that day, one of the busiest travel days of the year. The figure for passengers expected for Friday was even higher.



Passengers wait to check in at Gatwick Airport in England, Friday, Dec. 21, 2018. Flights resumed at London's Gatwick Airport on Friday morning after drones sparked the shutdown of the airfield for more than 24 hours, leaving tens of thousands of passengers stranded or delayed during the busy holiday season. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Gatwick serves more than 43 million passengers a year.

The hundreds of travelers stuck overnight at Gatwick by Thursday's closure described freezing conditions as they slept on benches or the airport floor. Many complained they weren't being kept informed about re-routed flights.

Around 145 of the 837 flights at Gatwick on Friday had already been canceled before the latest reported drone sighting, the airport said. In the afternoon, it strongly warned passengers to "check the status of your flight with your airline before departing for the airport."

The prospect of a deadly collision between what British police described as industrial-grade drones and a passenger plane led authorities to stop all flights in and out of Gatwick on Wednesday evening.

The British military joined police and aviation authorities in searching for the culprit or culprits behind the drone intrusion, which police said was designed to cause maximum disruption over the holiday period.



A waiting passenger sleeps at Gatwick Airport in England, Friday, Dec. 21, 2018. Flights resumed at London's Gatwick Airport on Friday morning after drones sparked the shutdown of the airfield for more than 24 hours, leaving tens of thousands of passengers stranded or delayed during the busy holiday season. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said Friday there had been about 40 sightings of "a small number of drones" while the airport was shut down.

He told the BBC that the drone disruption at Gatwick was "unprecedented anywhere in the world."

Grayling said additional "military capabilities" and a range of security measures had been put in place overnight but would not elaborate. He said the airport was considered safe for flights Friday even though the drone operator had not been apprehended.

Some British officials said shooting down a drone remains a "tactical option" but there were concerns that could inadvertently hurt people on the ground.

"Shooting the drone out of the sky is probably one of the least effective options" available, said Assistant Chief Constable Steve Barry of Sussex Police.

He said police believe there was more than one drone operating around Gatwick in the last two days and that it was possible the drones were being operated from fairly far away.



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Citation: Flights suspended again at London Gatwick after drone report (2018, December 21)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-12-flights-london-gatwick-drone.html>

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