Volcanic ash crisis

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The European Union's transport ministers held an exchange of views on the consequences of the air traffic disruptions caused by the volcanic eruption in Iceland (Eyjafjallajökull) and the measures to be taken in response.

The Council based its debate on an information note in which the Commission analyses the impact of the crisis and proposes a number of **immediate and structural measures**.

As a result of its discussions, the Council agreed on the following conclusions:

Taking into account the international dimension of the crisis and the need of an international management approach to cope with such crisis situations, the Council considers that the following measures are necessary:

- on the need to develop by the next transport Council a new European methodology and a coherent approach for safety risk assessment and risk management in relation to the c**losure and reopening of airspace** in case of the presence of ash in the airspace and of natural disasters and others potential threats; it notes Member States´ willingness to follow Eurocontrol advice in the interim, taking into account technical developments, and the expertise of the volcanic ash advisory centres (VAACS);
- on the need of establishing by the relevant authorities responsible for flight safety, without delay, **binding limit values, at EU level**, which clearly defines the safety envelope of engines and aircrafts as regards the **risk of volcanic ashes**;
- to welcome the creation by the Commission of a working group of international experts with the aim of establishing an inventory of the relevant technological and methodological tools, and a research and technology road map to make the most up-to-date and validated tools quickly and regularly available to take the appropriate decisions. In this context, it calls for an EU initiative on this matter in view of the ICAO General Assembly in September 2010;
- on the importance of giving the highest priority to the acceleration and anticipation of the full implementation of the Single European Sky. It calls the European institutions and the Member States to take urgently the appropriate decisions on a series of measures identified by the Commission: (i) the immediate creation of a crisis coordination cell, (ii) nomination without delay of the Functional Airspace Blocks coordinator, (iii) accelerated implementation of the Functional Airspace Blocks, (iv) appointment of the European network manager before the end of 2010;
- adoption before summer 2010 of the performance scheme;
- acceleration of the implementation of EASA's new competences, particularly on ATM, to be assumed before 2012;
- adoption of the SESAR deployment strategy before the end of 2010;
- to stress the need for a robust and interlinked European Transport system, where the different transport modes, act in close cooperation with each other, and welcomes the Commission's intention to make concrete proposals in order to develop **mobility plans to be applied by the Member States in case of a sudden transport crisis within the EU**;
- that Regulations on air passengers' rights are fully applicable and enforced in a uniform manner, in the context of such crisis, taking into account the exceptional circumstances. It invites the European Commission to take into account the experience and the different reactions of all stakeholders during the ash cloud crisis in the context of the current review of the Regulation 261/2004;
- to recall the existing legal framework (Article 107, 2b of the TFEU) applicable to potential support measures by Member States;
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to take note of the Commission's decision to create an **Aviation Platform** gathering all aviation stakeholders at European level to follow up the crisis measures and to work closely with all air transport actors on all initiatives that have an impact on the sector;

- to invite the Commission together with Eurocontrol and the competent national authorities to continue to closely monitor the situation;
- lastly, to invite the Commission to present a **report**, in time to be discussed in the Council of **24th June 2010**.

The EU's transport ministers had already addressed the air traffic disruptions at an informal meeting via video/audio-conferencing on 19 April 2010. Confronted with a paralysis of air traffic in most parts of Europe because of restrictions imposed for safety reasons, they agreed on a progressive and coordinated opening of European air space, while underlining that safety must be considered an absolute priority. Based on a technical assessment by the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation (Eurocontrol), ministers decided on a **common scheme which provides for the definition of three zones** : (i) a no-fly zone near the ash plume; (ii) a zone with small ash concentrations where Member States may impose certain flight restrictions; (iii) and an ash-free zone without any restrictions. This common scheme came into force on 20 April and continues to be applicable.