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Hundreds Miss Sheremetyevo Flights Because of Road Work

By Maria Antonova

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Passengers taking the Aeroexpress train to Sheremetyevo Airport from Belorussky Station on Thursday. Ticket sales have nearly doubled this week. **Vladimir Filonov**

A small bridge drew enormous attention Thursday when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin stepped in to resolve a traffic deadlock that has paralyzed the main highway northwest of Moscow.

Leningradskoye Shosse has been reduced to two lanes because of emergency road repairs where it crosses over railroad tracks in Khimki, just outside Moscow. The resulting traffic jams have led to hundreds of people missing their flights from Sheremetyevo Airport, causing losses of more than 1.6 million euros ($2 million) for Aeroflot.

“If passengers can’t fly out of Sheremetyevo, then this is a problem,” Putin said at a meeting of the presidium.

Putin ordered Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov to work with local authorities to resolve the situation.

The deadlock has prompted the Transportation Ministry to hold a special meeting with Moscow and Moscow region authorities to develop a rescue strategy. Transportation Minister Igor Levitin, who flew out of the capital Wednesday to hold a meeting in Khabarovsk, was forced to take a public train to the airport, Aeroflot deputy director Andrei Kalmykov said.

Aeroflot, Russia's largest carrier, lost about 700,000 euros because of the traffic on Monday — the first day of the unannounced weekend road closure, causing 1,300 people to miss their flights — and is currently losing about 400,000 euros daily, Kalmykov told reporters Thursday.

Other airlines that fly out of Sheremetyevo include as Delta Air Lines, Air France and Alitalia.

Sheremetyevo director Mikhail Vasilenko said on his blog Wednesday that City Hall had intentionally blocked off the roads in order to undermine Sheremetyevo and support rival airport Vnukovo, which is opening a new terminal in July.

Vasilenko sent a complaint to the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service, which has opened an investigation into whether the traffic problems are linked with the Vnukovo terminal opening.

"In a normal economy, this would be an abnormal situation," said Andrei Golomozin, the service's deputy director, Interfax reported. "Those who are responsible should be punished. I am not sure whether it will fall into the realm of anti-monopoly law."

"An intervention by the country's top officials will normalize everything quickly." Vasilenko said Thursday.

In the meantime, Sheremetyevo and its carriers are advising their passengers to use the Aeroexpress train, which connects the airport with Moscow's Belorussky Station.

It's not clear, however, whether the train will be able to handle a large influx of additional passengers. Over the past week, daily passenger volume has already increased from 9,000 to 15,000 people, and there are not enough seats between 7 and 8 a.m., as well as between 5 and 6 p.m., Aeroexpress spokeswoman Yelena Frolova said.

The company has requested 20 additional train cars from Russian Railways, but "it will take some time to get them ready," she said, adding that Aeroexpress was not warned about road construction and impending traffic delays.

Sheremetyevo Airport served 6.57 million passengers in the first five months of 2010, it said last week, or more than 43,000 passengers per day.

Tourist operators have asked that construction be pushed back until after summer high season because the train is not capable of handling all of the passengers.

"People who come to the station have to rush onto the train ... and tourists with luggage and children have had to walk home," the Russian Association of Tour Operators said in a letter to Mayor Yury Luzhkov. The quickest that someone can drive to Sheremetyevo from the city

center is four to six hours, the letter said.

The traffic police said Thursday that the situation was being monitored around the clock but that conditions can't be improved by directing traffic.

"It would be difficult," traffic police head Viktor Kiryanov told Interfax. It's possible "only if you make a small helicopter and transport everyone by air."

The Prosecutor General's Office has also begun investigating the traffic jam and safety in the area, it said on its web site.

So far, it looks as though no actual repair work is being done on the blockaded area of the highway.

Moscow's housing and utilities department told Vremya Novostei on Thursday that road workers were waiting to receive a train schedule from Russian Railways, which operates the railway under the bridge, before getting to work.

Nevertheless, Moscow authorities have denied all responsibility for the traffic jams.

Two lanes are sufficient to service drivers and buses, Deputy Mayor Pyotr Biryukov told reporters Thursday, adding that the road was blocked off on orders from the Federal Transportation Inspection Service.

Besides, Biryukov said, the bridge is on Moscow region territory, and the city had to take responsibility for the bridge because repairs haven't been done for 50 years.

The Moscow region's top transportation official, Pyotr Katsyv, said Thursday that the region was ready to take responsibility for the bridge if City Hall repaired it first or provided money for the repairs.

The situation illustrates the ineptitude of officials to handle Moscow's worsening traffic conditions, said analyst Mikhail Blinkin.

"A trivial issue of repairing an old bridge has developed into an emergency situation impacting the entire city," he said. "Everyone has known since 2000 that the bridge needs to be renovated," and a bypass could have been built to provide for additional traffic capacity.

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