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Aeroflot Sues Swiss for Airport Collapse

By Alexander Bratersky

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Aeroflot said Wednesday that a Swiss company caused four days of disrupted flights amid freezing rain at Sheremetyevo Airport last month by failing to fulfill an order for chemicals used to de-ice airplanes.

An Aeroflot spokeswoman confirmed to The Moscow Times that a lawsuit had been filed, but refused to elaborate.

The airline is seeking 2.9 million euros ($3.9 million) from de-icing agent maker Clariant International, Interfax reported Wednesday, citing an unidentified Aeroflot official.

About 200 Aeroflot flights were delayed from Dec. 25 to 28 after freezing rain coated planes and runways at Sheremetyevo, the airline's hub.

Because of the foul weather, Aeroflot used up its monthly supply of de-icing fluid in just three days, but Clariant failed to supply more in time, Aeroflot chief executive Vitaly Savelyev said this week, RBC Daily reported.

“The supply failure triggered the faulty situation” at the airport, he said, adding that Clariant had been a reliable partner since they started working together six years earlier.

Clariant has said it ran out of de-icing agent because of high demand from European airlines that faced similar problems from freezing rain across the continent.

Clariant spokesman Ulrich Nies refused to comment on Aeroflot's lawsuit Wednesday, saying the company “is not aware of any legal action against Clariant by our customer Aeroflot."

Only one Russian company, Octaflud, currently produces de-icing fluid, and Savelyev said this week that Russian production is not enough, which necessitates the imports of the Swiss agent via Germany. He said Aeroflot hopes to eventually switch solely to local suppliers.

Aeroflot itself has been accused of mishandling the December shortage, with Sheremetyevo Airport head Mikhail Vasilenko writing in his blog this month that the airline ran out of de-icing agent Dec. 26 but attempted to cover up the problem to protect its image at the expense of passengers.

Amid threats of lawsuits, Aeroflot sought to soothe passengers by issuing $10 million in vouchers for free tickets — although the vouchers also provoked anger because they didn't cover accompanying tax surcharges that some passengers thought the airline should pay.

Despite the delays, Aeroflot reported a 16 percent increase in passengers for December.

While the freezing rain crippled Sheremetyevo, Moscow's busiest airport, Domodedovo, suffered worse problems, with a blackout caused by ice-covered power lines breaking apart. The city's third airport, Vnukovo, saw no major problems.

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