HEATHROW INDECISION HIGHLIGHTS EUROPE'S AIRPORT CRUNCH

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Moves by Britain to delay, once again, a decision on where to build a new airport runway to serve the London area highlights Europe's difficulties in keeping up with emerging countries when it comes to creating vital airport capacity.

By 2035, airports across Europe will be unable to accommodate some 2 million flights due to capacity shortages according to Eurocontrol, the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation.

The economic cost of being unable to accommodate the demand is estimated at up to 818,000 jobs lost and an annual loss in GDP of between EUR28 billion and EUR52 billion (US$31-57 billion), the European Commission said this week.

The Commission announced measures this week to boost the aviation sector but faced criticism

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for not encouraging member states to do more to boost airport capacity.

"It's good to come out with a new strategy but you have to deliver practicalities on the day to day level as well," independent aviation analyst John Strickland told Reuters.

Echoing decades of wrangling over airport expansion in south-east England, other countries have dragged their heels on airport capacity, not least because of opposition from local residents to noise and over environmental concerns.

A new airport in Berlin remains unfinished, with the opening delayed until at least the second half of 2017 from an initial target of 2010 after a series of construction flaws.

Also in Germany, a court slapped a night flight ban on Frankfurt airport, Europe's third largest, when it opened its fourth runway in 2011.

New airports have often struggled. Spain's "ghost" airports of Castellon and Ciudad Real built during the country's construction boom did not attract airlines or passengers.

Milan's Malpensa airport announced a major investment programme in 2008, only for Italian national carrier Alitalia to say it would move its main hub back to Rome because the costs were too high.

Strickland said it was key to add capacity where the airlines would use it, and that would mean expanding Heathrow, London's largest airport, rather than rival Gatwick.

Licence to Grow

Countries in the Middle East and Asia are using improved aviation links to drive trade, investment, tourism and economic development. Their governments are also less bound by the environmental and social concerns that slow progress in densely-populated European countries.

For example, China plans to increase the number of airports it has to 260 by 2020, compared with 202 at the end of 2014.

Dubai is aiming to build the world's biggest airport with capacity of 160 million passengers and Istanbul's upcoming new six-runway airport should serve 150 million passengers annually by 2028.

Atlanta, the world's busiest airport at present, served 96 million passengers in 2014.

Airports association ACI Europe said the Commission should have set EU-level targets for airport capacity growth in Europe.

"Outside Europe, most emerging countries are deploying airport capacity as a way to position their economies globally," ACI Europe Director General Olivier Jankovec told Reuters this week.

"It's clear that in Europe we're not doing a good job in that it's very difficult for airports to get a licence to grow."

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