

International

Drone intrusion brings London Gatwick Airport to a standstill

Causing misery for tens of thousands of stuck passengers

GATWICK AIRPORT: London Gatwick Airport was forced to suspend all flights yesterday due to drones flying over the airfield, causing misery for tens of thousands of stuck passengers just days before Christmas. Flights into Gatwick, south of the British capital, were diverted to other airports while passengers waiting to take off faced grueling delays. Gatwick is the eighth-busiest airport in Europe and sits behind Mumbai as the world's busiest single runway air hub.

A cat-and-mouse manhunt is under way to catch the drone operator. Two drones were first spotted flying over the airport at around 9:00 pm (2100 GMT) on Wednesday. The airfield briefly reopened at 3:00 am on Thursday, but had to be closed again following further sightings. "All flights to and from Gatwick are suspended due to ongoing drone activity around the airport. Unfortunately, there are significant delays and cancellations to all flights," the airport said. "We apologize to everyone affected, but the safety of all our passengers and staff is our number one priority." Some 10,000 passengers were affected on Wednesday night, and a further 110,000 were due to either take off or land at the airport on 760 flights yesterday. More than 20 police units from two forces were searching for those responsible.

"We believe this to be a deliberate act to disrupt the airport. However, there are absolutely no indications to suggest this is terror-related," said Superintendent Justin Burtenshaw of the local Sussex

Police force. "Each time we believe we get close to the operator, the drone disappears; when we look to reopen the airfield, the drone reappears."

'Everyone's trying to get home'

Chris Woodrooffe, Gatwick's chief operating officer, told BBC radio that it would be dangerous to shoot at the drone due to the danger of stray bullets. Inside the airport, weary passengers faced a grim wait to reach their destinations, with many returning home for the holidays. Gisele Fenech, 43, who was travelling to Malta, was among those stranded. "We're meeting family and it's my daughter's birthday today so it's gone all wrong. We've been looking forward to this for so long," she told AFP. "Everyone's trying to get home for Christmas."

Musab Rashid, 22, who was going to Copenhagen, said: "It's wrong, it's childish of them to do this, because it's affected more than 100,000 people." Karin Sjostrom-Nandris, 49, was heading to Stockholm, said: "We can't really leave this queue because this seems to be the only place we could possibly find out any information. The queue looks like it's several hours long, so we could be here for some time."

Under British law, drones cannot be flown near aircraft or within a kilometer of an airport, or at an altitude of over 400 feet. Those breaking the law could face up to five years in prison. Prime Minister Theresa May's spokesman slammed the perpetrator. "This behavior is irresponsible and



GATWICK AIRPORT: Passengers wait at the North Terminal at London Gatwick Airport, south of London, yesterday after all flights were grounded due to drones flying over the airfield. — AFP

completely unacceptable," he told reporters. "We feel for all the passengers who are facing so much disruption." In parliament, members of the upper House of Lords raised the likelihood of a new

wave of people getting hold of drones as presents this Christmas. Gatwick serves more than 228 destinations in 74 countries for 45 million passengers a year. — AFP

Morocco eyes 'terror' link in hikers murder

RABAT: Moroccan investigators said yesterday they have arrested three fugitive suspects in the grisly murder of two Scandinavian hikers as they follow a link to Islamic extremism. The arrests in the city of Marrakesh on Thursday morning follow a first arrest on Monday of a man suspected of belonging to an Islamic extremist group, hours after the discovery of the two women's bodies in the High Atlas mountains.

"The suspects have been arrested" and investigators are in the process of "verifying the terrorist motive, which is supported by the evidence and the findings of enquiries," a statement from Morocco's central judicial investigations office said. The bodies of Danish student Louisa Vesterager Jespersen, 24, and 28-year-old Maren Ueland from Norway were found on Monday, after the women had pitched their tent at an isolated mountain site two hours walk from the tourist village of Imlil.

Moroccan police have focused on the terrorism line of inquiry since arresting the first suspect on Monday in a poor neighborhood of the region's main city of Marrakesh, which is a magnet for foreign tourists. "The radical Islamism line has not been removed, because of the profile of the (first) suspect arrested and the three" others, who have links to radical Islamic circles, a source close to the investigation told AFP on Wednesday. Investigators released profiles of the three fugitives late on Wednesday as they launched an intensified manhunt.

In one of the black and white photos circulated by the authorities, one of the suspects wears long white clothing and a white skullcap, and has a long beard. A second suspect also has a long beard, while the third has a thin face and a goatee. All three hail from Marrakesh, and one of them had "a court record linked to terrorist acts", police spokesman Boubker Sabik said.

'Brutal and meaningless'

A source close to the investigation told AFP that "the arrests highlight the efficiency of the security forces". Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen denounced what he called a "beastly crime". Addressing reporters on Thursday morning, Rasmussen said "like the whole world, we react with consternation, disgust and a profound sadness."

Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg condemned what she called a "brutal and meaningless attack on innocents". Authorities are still determining the authenticity of a grisly video posted on social media allegedly showing the murder of one of the women, an investigation source said. The killings have sparked fears of a hit to Morocco's crucial tourist sector — which accounts for 10 percent of national income — as the kingdom's relative security has always been a major selling point.

"What most of us had feared - that is to say a terrorist angle to the double crime in the region of Imlil, has been confirmed," said leading news website Medias 24. "Shock, sadness and revulsion are perceptible in Morocco," it added. Traumatized by the murders, residents of Imlil are deeply fearful for their livelihoods, and have lent their help to investigators in identifying suspects, a tourism sector source told AFP. Morocco has been spared jihadist attacks since 2011, when a bomb attack on a cafe in Marrakesh's famed Jamaa El Fna Square killed 17 people, most of them European tourists. An attack in the financial capital Casablanca killed 33 people in 2003. — AFP

Row over Christmas plan to 'evacuate' Greece migrants

THE HAGUE: The Dutch government yesterday warned local volunteers who want to drive to Greece to fetch 150 asylum seekers over Christmas that their plan amounted to illegal human trafficking. The "Let's Bring Them Here" foundation is set to leave the central Dutch city of Utrecht for Athens today in a convoy of around 50 cars and a specially refurbished bus. The foundation said the purpose of the 2,500-kilometre road trip was to "evacuate refugees" living in dire conditions in camps in Greece.

"A humanitarian disaster is ongoing," the foundation said in a statement on its website, which also has a petition with some 44,701 signatures urging the Netherlands to take 1,000 refugees from Greece. "Because we cannot wait for the authorities to respond to the signatures and something has to be done now, we are going to drive to Greece with about 50 cars on 21st December," the foundation said.

Let's Bring Them Here has "announced to the Greek government that they are coming with the intent to bring 150 refugees home" to the Netherlands. The convoy will also have an elongated bus painted in the foundation's colors. But the Dutch authorities poured cold water on the plan. "Even though I share the concerns about the conditions in camps on the Greek islands, fetching people illegally and bringing them to the Netherlands without assurances is a bad idea," Deputy Justice Minister Mark Harbers said.

"The illegal transportation of people without residency rights comes down to human trafficking and is punishable by law," Harbers said in a statement sent to AFP. — AFP