

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Concerns ease in Newfoundland over volcanic ash

Some domestic airlines cancelled flights out of St. John's on Sunday after warnings that ash could be heading to Canada

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Concern that a volcanic eruption in Iceland could have an impact on Eastern Canada diminished greatly Monday with data that suggested no significant ash in the atmosphere east of Newfoundland.

The Canadian Meteorological Centre in Montreal also said the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which erupted April 14, sending a massive ash plume into the sky, appeared to be settling down.

"Based on satellite imagery and reports from pilots, there's no evidence of any significant amount of volcanic ash west of a line that runs through Iceland," said Richard Hogue, the centre's director of national prediction operations.

"Reports suggest that the volcano has really calmed down. For now the news is good."

Concerns were raised over the weekend that the ash had the potential to blow westward toward Newfoundland.

Prevalent winds in the jet stream have been carrying most of the dense ash cloud east to Europe, shutting down the primary commercial air corridor between North America and Europe.

"There should be optimism for opening up the flying space now," said Mr. Hogue, who is hoping to leave for Paris later in the week.

Although there were no flight restrictions in Canadian airspace, some domestic airlines cancelled flights out of St. John's, N.L., on Sunday after British meteorologists suggested that ash could be heading towards Atlantic Canada.

However, by Monday most airlines operating at the St. John's airport were returning to normal schedules, impeded only by heavy fog.

International flights out of Canada were still being affected, though, because many European airports remained closed Monday.

Over the weekend, Air Canada cancelled flights to London Heathrow, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Frankfurt, Munich, Zurich, Geneva, Rome and Tel Aviv until further notice.

The flight restrictions have been a source of frustration for Sean Sullivan and Karen Pinchin, who are anxious to start a long-planned, three-month adventure in Europe and Egypt.

The two freelance journalists have been stuck in Fredericton with family since last week because their flights to London and Barcelona were scrubbed.

"We drove here from Vancouver. The visit is nice but we're starting to go a little stir crazy," said Mr. Sullivan with a laugh, still able to find humour in the frustrating situation.

Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Pinchin have taken a hiatus from work to make the trip and are trying to stay on top of developments using their mobile phones.

"We've been rebooked and are hoping to get out Tuesday night, but right now we're stuck here trying to come up with some contingency plans," said Mr. Sullivan. "I've researched everything from cruise lines out of Florida to freighters and cargo ships from different points along the eastern seaboard."

Marcus Bursik, a volcanologist with the University of Buffalo, is an expert in tracking ash plumes and their effects on air transportation. He has been looking at data from the Icelandic eruption and said that while the cloud threat may seem unique, it's very common on routes between North America and Asia.

"In that area planes are diverted quite often around ash clouds that are erupting from the Aleutian Islands," said Mr. Bursik.

He said planes can fly above the eight- to 10-kilometre-high ash clouds but the problem is different "with the Iceland eruption because that ash is right over the landing sites, so you can't take off or get in."

Mr. Bursik said there's a reason jet engines and ash clouds are not a good mix.

"The ash actually gets heated and turns into a liquid, becoming a kind of glassy rind that sticks to parts in the back of the engine," he explained. "It can cause flameouts and the engines will stop working."

Falling ash can also present a health hazard thousands of kilometres from where it spewed from the earth.

"It can cause abrasion issues because you're breathing in very sharp silicate particles that can hurt the lungs," said Mr. Bursik.

