

Safety fears over Europe's busy skies

Level 3 | Advanced

Boom in budget flights means that system will soon be unable to cope

1 Key vocabulary

Fill the gaps using these words and phrases from the text:

cope with congested collision close shave
no-frills up to speed proliferation consternation

1. If you are _____, you know everything that you need to know about something.
2. A _____ is a situation in which you only just avoid something dangerous or unpleasant.
3. _____ is another word for 'crowded' and is often used to refer to roads or airports.
4. A _____ airline is one which offers cheap fares and no extra services.
5. _____ is a feeling of extreme concern or worry.
6. If you _____ a difficult situation, you deal with it successfully.
7. A _____ is a crash between two or more vehicles.
8. _____ is a sudden increase in number or amount.

2 What do you think?

Choose the best answer in each case:

1. How many flights cross Europe in a typical 24-hour period?
 - a. 2,900
 - b. 29,000
 - c. 290
2. How many aircraft are in the sky above Europe at any given daytime moment?
 - a. 35
 - b. 350
 - c. 3,500
3. How many passengers are in the sky above Europe at any given daytime moment?
 - a. 4,000
 - b. 40,000
 - c. 400,000
4. What percentage of flights are operated by so-called 'no-frills' budget airlines?
 - a. 10%
 - b. 20%
 - c. 30%
5. What is the minimum height separation between aircraft?
 - a. 1,000 feet
 - b. 2,000 feet
 - c. 5,000 feet

Now look in the text and check your answers.

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The swarms of brightly painted budget aircraft flying over Europe are busier, cheaper and more plentiful than ever. But they are creating a painful headache for air traffic controllers, who face a challenge in coping with skies packed with a record number of flights. At the present rate of growth, Europe's skies will become "full" in little more than a decade, with current procedures unable to cope, according to Europe's top air traffic controller.

The warning will reopen fierce controversy over the safety of the continent's congested skies. It came just days ahead of the publication of an official report this week that is likely to blame failures in air traffic control for one of the most devastating European air disasters - a mid-air collision over Lake Constance two years ago that claimed 71 lives. National control centres across the continent are coordinated by a network run by a Brussels-based agency, Eurocontrol, which matches take-off and landing slots in 33 countries from Ireland to Ukraine. Eurocontrol looks after 29,000 flights in a typical 24-hour period. Despite a slowdown in air travel after September 11 2001, it predicts that annual traffic across Europe will double to 16m aircraft by 2020.

Victor Aguado, director general of Eurocontrol, said last week: "In the middle of the next decade, we will reach capacity using the present systems. Beyond that, we'll need something else, which today's technology can't provide." To cope with the flights boom, minimum height separation between aircraft has been cut from 2,000ft to 1,000ft.

Safety experts are now working towards "self-separation" technology that will limit the role of controllers by improving electronic equipment that allows aircraft to set safe paths away from each other automatically.

At any daytime moment there are 3,500 aircraft over Europe, carrying some 400,000 people. One in ten is operated by low-cost airlines. To the consternation of experts, much of the growth is forecast to come from east European states, where budget airlines are looking for new destinations. Safety chiefs have warned that the quality of air traffic control in Europe's new member states is variable. Erik Merckx, Eurocontrol's head of safety enhancement, said: "If we don't get these new states up to speed, with the increasing traffic levels we're predicting we will have a problem."

Scores of companies have entered the no-frills market, including nine budget airlines based in Germany alone. Next month a Hungarian carrier, Wizz, will enter the battle, offering flights from Luton in England to Budapest and to Katowice in Poland. While annual growth in traffic is set to be a modest 3% in Britain and 2.9% in France, a proliferation of services is forecast to increase flights over Ukraine by 7%, over Belarus by 5.5%, over Turkey by 5.9% and over Bulgaria by 5%.

Eurocontrol reckons six states have safety management that is below "acceptable" levels, though it declines to name them. Unions warn that progress could be tough as free movement of labour within the enlarged EU allows experienced controllers to move west in search of better-paid vacancies. Shane Enright, aviation

secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation, said: "There's a Europe-wide shortage of controllers. There needs to be harmonisation of pay and conditions, otherwise these new member states are going to lose out." Cost pressures are tight: no-frills carriers are reluctant to pay for any air traffic control measures they can avoid.

Swiss air traffic control said last week that there were four near-misses in its airspace in April alone. A close shave between an Iberia passenger plane and a business jet over Zurich could have had "disastrous consequences", according to a Swiss newspaper report. The Swiss, who handle a key corridor for aircraft passing over the heart of the continent, will come under further pressure this week. German investigators are due to publish the results of a two-year examination of the Uberlingen disaster, in which a DHL freight aircraft crashed into a charter flight packed with Russian schoolchildren. The accident is expected to be blamed on mistakes by Peter Nielsen, a controller working the night shift at an inadequately staffed Swiss control centre. Mr Nielsen was stabbed to death in February by a grieving Russian father who lost his wife and two children in the crash.

The Uberlingen crash was Europe's third fatal accident in three years caused by errors in air traffic control. It followed collisions on the ground at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport in 2000 and Milan's Linate airfield in 2001. The sequence ended a 16-year run without any deaths. Eurocontrol admits it is concerned about the trend.

Andrew Clark,
The Guardian Weekly

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3 Comprehension check

Match the beginnings and endings of the sentences.

1. If the present rate of growth in air traffic continues, ...
 2. If air traffic control in Europe's new member states does not improve ...
 3. While air traffic in Britain and France will increase by only a modest amount, ...
 4. According to Eurocontrol, the European air traffic control agency, ...
 5. One of the main problems facing the aviation industry is ...
 6. The Swiss are under particular pressure because ...
 7. The crash over Uberlingen was caused by ...
 8. Experts expect that much of the growth in low-cost airlines ...
- a. ... will come from east European countries.
 - b. ... the shortage of air traffic controllers.
 - c. ... in some east European countries it will increase by more than 5%.
 - d. ... experts say there will be a problem.
 - e. ... their country is a key corridor for aircraft passing over the heart of Europe.
 - f. ... Europe's skies will become "full" in just over ten years.
 - g. ... 6 countries in Europe have unacceptable safety management levels.
 - h. ... mistakes made by an air traffic controller.

4 Vocabulary 1 - collocations

Match the words in the left-hand column with the words they collocate with in the right-hand column. Check your answers in the text.

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. fierce | a. shift |
| 2. inadequately | b. airline |
| 3. close | c. expert |
| 4. disastrous | d. controversy |
| 5. night | e. accident |
| 6. safety | f. shave |
| 7. budget | g. staffed |
| 8. fatal | h. consequences |

5 Vocabulary 2 - find the word

1. Find a noun that means 'large groups of insects flying together'.
2. Find a noun that means '10 years'.
3. Find an adjective that means 'very shocking'.
4. Find another word for 'improvement'.
5. Find a noun which means 'large numbers' and which literally means 'groups of 20'.
6. Find another term for 'a close shave'.
7. Find a verb meaning 'to attack with a knife'.
8. Find an adjective which means 'worried'.

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6 Grammar focus - passive sentences

Look at these examples from the text:

Much of the growth is forecast to come from east European states.

The accident is expected to be blamed on mistakes by an air traffic controller.

Rewrite these statements in an appropriate passive form using the verbs in brackets:

1. Air traffic will double by 2020. (PREDICT)
2. Safety will be a major concern. (EXPECT)
3. Europe's skies will become "full" in little more than a decade. (EXPECT)
4. Human error was the cause of the Uberlingen crash. (THINK)
5. Extra services will increase the number of flights over Ukraine by 7%. (FORECAST)
6. Experienced controllers are moving in search of better pay. (BELIEVE)
7. Six states have safety management below "acceptable" levels. (RECKON)
8. The quality of air traffic control in some countries is variable. (THINK)

7 Discussion

Which is more important, safety or cost?

Make a list of points for and against using budget airlines.