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European air traffic at a standstill: Railways adapt their products and increase capacity to assist stranded passengers

(Paris, 20/4/2010). The closure of the airspace over 30 European countries following the volcanic eruption in Iceland has left international passenger transport services in an extremely difficult situation, in particular leaving thousands of travellers stranded in airports across the continent.

Confronted with these exceptional circumstances European railway companies are doing their utmost to increase capacity and assist in providing transport for passengers who are stranded in airports and unable to reach their destination, whether by domestic or international services. In these circumstances trains are proving to be a particularly effective alternative to both domestic air services and intra-European flights of a few hundred kilometres.

As one example among many, the German railways have laid on a number of supplementary services over the past few days and are using all their available rolling stock and personnel to cope with the upsurge in passengers. On certain lines, such as Hamburg to Puttgarden, additional bus services have been laid on. The German train service has seen a 30% increase on normal passenger numbers. Demand is particularly high on international corridors heading towards the west, for example to Paris and London. There has been a similar enhancement of transport services in Denmark (DSB), between Copenhagen and Berlin or Hamburg, in Norway (NSB) and in the Netherlands (NS).

In Spain, where airports have been reopened, RENFE has worked to increase the number of available seats on services to Irun/Hendaye, and more generally, on trains linking Madrid and Barcelona with Paris. On Sunday, thanks to this increase in capacity, an extra 9,000 travellers used Spanish train services. In Italy, FS/Trenitalia have laid on a large number of supplementary trains, many of which are being run in cooperation with other railway companies, to increase the number of international links. Special trains between Milan and Paris and Rome and Paris have been proposed to provide transport for tourists stranded in Italian airports. Two special services of the "Frecciarossa" high speed train run by Trenitalia have been laid on between Milan and Rome.

Similarly, Eurostar ran an extra 10 services between the UK and the continent on Sunday, or 33 extra trains in total over the last few days. This means that Eurostar has transported 165,000 passengers since the weekend or in other words 50,000 passengers more than usual during this period. SNCF announced 5,000 extra seats between Paris and London for the 19 April alone.

Still in the field of international transport, an extra 1,000 seats were proposed on TGV and ICE services linking France and Germany, and 2,000 on Lyria services between France and Switzerland. Service capacity has also been increased between Switzerland and Germany.

Russian Railways has been providing additional train cars on international routes from Moscow to Helsinki, Warsaw, Prague and Vienna and from St Petersburg to Helsinki. A total of 45 passenger carriages have been added to continually operating services. From 16 to 18 April, RZD trains transported 10,000 passengers from Russia to Europe and back. Emergency operation centres have been set up at the Moscow and St Petersburg railway agencies, to monitor changes to the situation.

Other railway companies, including those of Italy, Switzerland, Hungary and Romania, have increased their night train capacity.

These examples demonstrate the railways' ability to react extremely rapidly and effectively to exceptional situations, to adapt their operating systems as flexibly as required, and to make the most of their assets of solidarity and international cooperation so as to best serve their customers.

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