

Officials Sluggish In Airport Response

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Passengers sleeping at a check-in counter at the departure hall of Moscow's Domodedovo Airport on Tuesday. **Mikhail Voskresensky**

President Dmitry Medvedev ordered Prosecutor General Yury Chaika on Tuesday to investigate the three-day collapse in operations at Moscow's two main airports — just hours after desperate passengers stranded in Sheremetyevo attacked workers.

About 20,000 people were stuck in Sheremetyevo and Domodedovo airports as of noon Tuesday, officials said. The crowd did not begin to diminish until late afternoon, when dozens of additional flights departed from the two ill-fated airports. Officials at both airports pledged to have both running as usual by the New Year.

Heavy freezing rain over the weekend led to power shortages in Domodedovo and caused flight delays in the two airports because aircraft and the tarmacs were covered with a glass-like coating of ice.

But passengers' problems have been aggravated by the failure of airport and airline staff to

provide even basic assistance or information about changes in flight schedules.

Desperate passengers in Sheremetyevo's Terminal D who were redirected to different gates only to be repeatedly denied boarding on Tuesday morning briefly scuffled with airport officials and then staged a sit-in and smashed clothing bins over the hard floors at security checkpoints. A [video](#) of the riot shot by a passenger was widely circulated online.

Security staff at the airport had changed into plain clothes after the incident to avoid provoking new assaults, a source in the airport told Gazeta.ru.

Medvedev's order to start a probe was issued after the chief Moscow transportation prosecutor, Yevgeny Pospelov, told reporters Tuesday that his subordinates had already started an investigation.

State Duma deputies, who mostly kept silent over problems that affected thousands of potential voters, jumped into the fray Tuesday, with Sergei Shishkaryov, head of the lower chamber's transportation committee, submitting a bill on airports to the legislature.

Shishkaryov told Itar-Tass that the bill would clarify who should be responsible for handling crises like the current one and would introduce heavy fines for guilty officials.

"We see today that existing laws allow officials, airport operators and carriers to lay the blame on each other, and we cannot find the last one in line," he said.

Transportation Minister Igor Levitin also broke a three-day silence, offering belated advice to Domodedovo, which he said should have shut down after Sunday's blackout.

"After the lights went off, the airport should have been closed so that no one would go there," he told reporters. "So I have questions for the airport management."

Domodedovo is owned by the private East Line Group. None of its top officials has made any public statement during the crisis, though the airport's director, Vyacheslav Nekrasov, issued a plea for help to government agencies Monday. Levitin said after a meeting with company CEOs Tuesday that they "lost their heads" after the blackout.

Still, questions lingered among many observers about why some simple actions, like helping out stranded passengers with food, water and transportation back to the city, were not taken by anyone.

"There was no such thing as giving free food by the Domodedovo staff. And my airline has been refusing to let us on board or give us any kind of accommodation or food, too," said Jazlan Jamaluddin, a passenger who said he waited for his flight in Domodedovo for 40 hours.

"Basically, all officials are acting as if it is not their problem, and all the flight schedules are a mess," he told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

Popular singer Oleg Gazmanov has postponed his concert in Ulyanovsk since he was also stuck in Domodedovo on Monday, spokeswoman Katerina Viktorova told The Moscow Times.

"He complained over the rude treatment of passengers by the airport staff. People could not

get any information about their flights,” she said.

In Sheremetyevo, which also suffered from bad weather conditions but no blackout, the situation improved Tuesday. The airport serviced 220 flights carrying some 17,000 passengers over the day, airport officials said in a statement sent to The Moscow Times.

Many stranded passengers wrote on social network sites that there was not enough food and water inside the airports' restricted areas.

“Everything has been eaten,” Tatyana, a staffer at the TGIF outlet in Sheremetyevo, told The Moscow Times.

She said the atmosphere was calmer than on Monday, however. “Nobody is screaming and crying,” she said, adding that her restaurant had not increased prices like many others were reported to have done.

Rossia-24 television showed a catering company employee at Domodedovo who said several men had tried to block a car bringing water earlier that day.

“They offered to buy up all our water and tried to stop us from entering the airport,” the man said.

Vyacheslav Glazychev, a member of the Public Chamber, said the people stranded in airports should demand compensation in courts.

“Blaming authorities is no solution. The most important thing is to hold the owners of the airports responsible,” he said.

Moscow-based lawyer Sergei Zhorin is preparing an unprecedented multimillion-dollar lawsuit against carriers and airports on behalf of stranded passengers, he told the Mayak radio station on Tuesday.

Viktor Gorbachev, head of the Aeroport Association, a private lobbying group working to develop civil aviation in Russia, told The Moscow Times that the official response showed a lack of coordination between agencies and companies.

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