

Putin to Switch Airports, Prompting Traffic Jitters

February 24, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

One of the Moscow region's busiest highways faces massive traffic jams after the Kremlin confirmed a temporary move of flights by senior officials to Sheremetyevo Airport.

A special aircraft division called Rossiya that serves senior officials will transfer most flights from its regular base at Vnukovo Airport to Sheremetyevo from April 15 to June 30 because of runway repairs, Viktor Khrekov, spokesman for the Office for Presidential Affairs, said Thursday.

The move will cause regular air carriers to slash the number of flights and may cause a collapse on the ever-busy Leningradskoye Shosse, which will be blocked to make way for official corteges.

Most officials would be delivered to the airport by helicopter, a Sheremetyevo spokesperson told Interfax.

But Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, said Putin would ride a

helicopter to Sheremetyevo but other government officials would have to commute by car, RIA–Novosti reported.

Khrekov promised that preventing a traffic collapse on Leningradskoye Shosse would be “worked on,” but did not elaborate, Interfax reported.

It is possible to transport officials by helicopter to Sheremetyevo from Vnukovo, located on the other side of the city, but that would require detours because flights over the capital are vulnerable to attack, said Maxim Agarkov of the SK–Strategia think tank. “There are too many high-rise buildings in Moscow from where it is easy to knock down a helicopter,” Agarkov said by telephone.

Sheremetyevo, which hosts more than 50 airlines, will have to cut the number of flights by 10 to 15 percent, or from 38 to about 34 per hour, Kommersant said, citing the Federal Air Transportation Agency. Aeroflot, which mostly operates from Sheremetyevo, will have to reduce flights by 3 to 5 percent, Kommersant said, citing the airline. This will cost the airline 8 to 10 percent of its profit, or \$300 million to \$400 million, the report said.

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