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Ombudsman criticises Commission's misleading information to air passengers during volcanic ash crisis

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For more information:
www.ombudsman.europa.eu

Contact:
Gundi Gadesmann,
Media and External
Relations Officer,
T. +32 2 284 26 09
gundi.gadesmann@ombudsman.europa.eu

The European Ombudsman, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, has criticised the misleading information given to air passengers by the European Commission during the volcanic ash crisis in 2010. This followed a complaint from the European Regions Airline Association about, among others, inaccurate information concerning compensation for delayed luggage. The Ombudsman asked the Commission to inform him by 31 May 2011 of the measures taken to prevent such a problem from occurring in the future.

Airline association complains about misleading Q&A document

In April 2010, the eruption of an Icelandic volcano led to the cancellation of thousands of flights in Europe. On 4 May 2010, the European Commission published on different websites information for affected air passengers, including a Q&A document. One day later, the European Regions Airline Association sent an urgent e-mail to the Commission, drawing its attention to what it considered to be misleading information.

The information in question included a paragraph on delayed luggage. The Q&A document wrongly implied that passengers had an automatic right to compensation in all cases involving delayed luggage.

It took the Commission two weeks to conclude that part of the Q&A document was indeed misleading and more than a month to remove it from the websites.

The Ombudsman criticised the publication of the misleading information. Furthermore, he concluded that the length of time it took the Commission to withdraw the document was

unacceptable. In his view, much more rapid action would have been necessary because the relevance of this air passenger information diminished as the situation at European airports began to return to normal.

This is the second time that the Ombudsman has found that the Commission published misleading air passenger information (see also: <http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/press/release.faces/en/185/html.bookmark>). He has therefore announced that, depending on the information the Commission will supply him with by the end of May 2011, an investigation into a potential systemic problem may be necessary.

The Ombudsman's complete decision is available at: <http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/cases/decision.faces/en/10258/html.bookmark>