

Mail Online

Remember that ash cloud? It didn't exist, says new evidence

By Sean Poulter

Last updated at 10:28 AM on 26th April 2010

Britain's airspace was closed under false pretences, with satellite images revealing there was no doomsday volcanic ash cloud over the entire country.

Skies fell quiet for six days, leaving as many as 500,000 Britons stranded overseas and costing airlines hundreds of millions of pounds.

Estimates put the number of Britons still stuck abroad at 35,000.

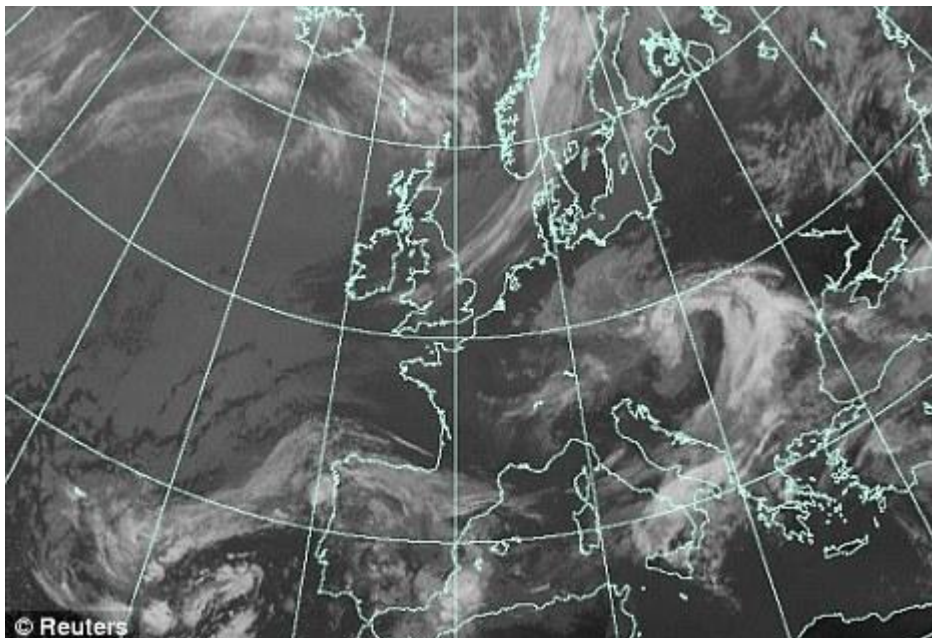


Stranded: Hundreds of desperate Britons sleep on the basement floor at Bangkok's International Airport, Thailand waiting to get flights home

However, new evidence shows there was no all-encompassing cloud and, where dust was present, it was often so thin that it posed no risk.

The satellite images demonstrate that the skies were largely clear, which will not surprise the millions who enjoyed the fine, hot weather during the flight ban.

Jim McKenna, the Civil Aviation Authority's head of airworthiness, strategy and policy, admitted: 'It's obvious that at the start of this crisis there was a lack of definitive data.'



False alarm? Satellite images have revealed there may never have been a doomsday volcanic ash cloud over the UK (file picture)

'It's also true that for some of the time, the density of ash above the UK was close to undetectable.'

The satellite images will be used by airlines in their battle to win tens of millions of pounds in compensation from governments for their losses.

The National Air Traffic Control Service decision to ban flights was based on Met Office computer models which painted a picture of a cloud of ash being blown south from the Eyjafjallajokull volcano.



Eruption: The Eyjafjallajokull volcano saw flights across Europe grind to a halt and passengers stranded

These models should have been tested by the Met Office's main research plane, a BAE 146 jet, but it was in a hangar to be repainted and could not be sent out until last Tuesday - the last day of the ban.

Evidence has emerged that the maximum density of the ash was only about one 20th of the limit that scientists, the Government, and aircraft and engine manufacturers have now decided is safe.

British Airways chief Willie Walsh always insisted the total shutdown went too far.

'My personal belief is that we could have safely continued operating for a period,' he said.

Mark Tanzer, chief executive of Britain's ABTA, which represents British travel agents and tour operators, said about 100,000 stranded British travellers should have been returned home by Monday morning.

About 35,000 more will remain marooned until Friday, the group said.

'While most flights are back to normal, and most stranded British passengers will be back by the end of this weekend, there is still quite a high level of disruption in some destinations.

'In some areas of the world, there is a significant lack of air capacity to enable British people to be returned quickly,' Tanzer said.

Many Icelandic airports are closed and though authorities say Eyjafjallajokull is now producing much less ash, they confirmed no signs of the eruption ending.

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Let's not jump to conclusions. Maybe the volcano spit out some H1N1 virus particles! They are just looking out for our own good, you know.

- Bastet11, San Diego, CA, USA, 27/4/2010 21:05

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So many chicken-littles - "what if" a plane had crashed. Rubbish, there are always active volcanoes in the world and no proof exists a plane has ever crashed from flying through a volcanic ash plume, even when flying directly through the thick of it. The air closure was from the outset utter stupidity, which I noted at the time.

If you really want your "air travel as safe as possible", do NOT fly when there are icy conditions, thunderstorms, or during migratory periods, because icy wings, lightning strikes and bird strikes HAVE caused numerous airplanes to crash. And certainly don't get into a car - that is treacherous by comparison.

But I guess logic doesn't work with the liberal government lackies, who will defend every insanity the nanny state imposes.

- Andreas, San Diego, California, USA, 27/4/2010 20:35

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Oh, and let's not forget swine flu of course!

- Kieran O'Donnell, Cambridge, UK, 27/4/2010 20:30

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This was another test to see how the immediate collapse of the airline industry would affect the population. The powers that be now know that they have around 5 days before complete chaos.

Remember the petrol strike of 2000? Another test. Again, 3 days, complete chaos.

How about the electricity blackout in New York on Friday afternoon at 4pm? (Not Monday morning at 10am you notice!) Another test.

Why didn't the US react quicker to Katrina, instead of waiting a week before helping people? Another test.

How about the UK gas shortage last winter? Another test.

What about the big one... the economic collapse of 2008. Another test.

Every time there is a situation like this, data is being gathered, so preparations can be made in readiness for complete collapse which will happen very soon.

Next time we have a global crisis of some sort, watch how slow the governments are to react. That's because they're gathering data on how quickly things break down.

- Kieran O'Donnell, Cambridge, UK, 27/4/2010 20:25

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I was in Portland when Mt. St. Helens dumped ash on us...however foolish we were at the time, it was a festive attitude and many of us drove to the high points to get a better view. Ash was thick and we had to use our windshield wipers to drive.

I could remember wrong, but I don't recall air traffic being grounded for days.

Just saying...

- Steve De'ak, Portland, Oregon, 27/4/2010 18:27

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- Steve De'ak, Portland, Oregon, 27/4/2010 18:14

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