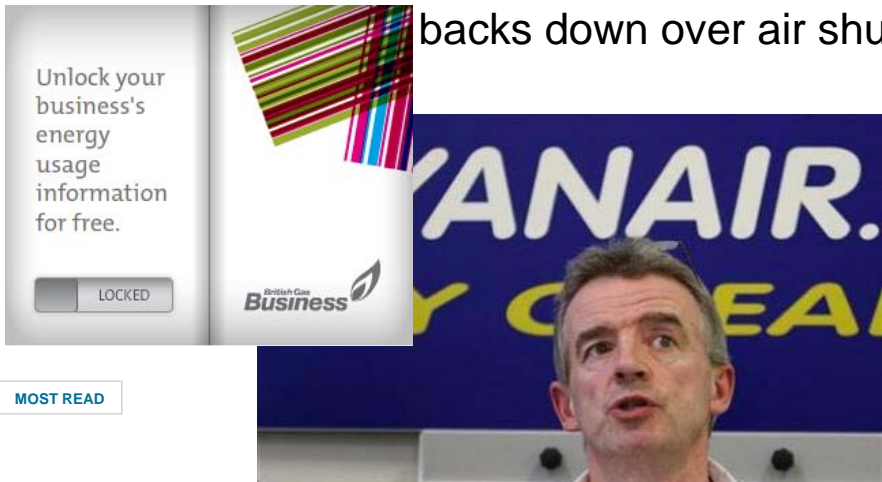


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Ryanair backs down over air shutdown

Andras Gergely and Pete Harrison
DUBLIN/BRUSSELS
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(Reuters) - Ireland's Ryanair backed down in a row over compensation for victims of the Icelandic ash crisis on Thursday as the European Commission warned low-cost airlines not to "discount" passengers' rights.

BUSINESS

Europe's largest low-cost airline said it would comply with an "unfair" European law that requires airlines to pay the hotel and food costs of people stranded without flights after refusing at first to repay more than the cost of the air ticket.

The argument over costs soured the homecoming of thousands of people forced to run up credit card debts or borrow money due to the six-day shutdown of large areas of European airspace due to fears of air crashes caused by ash from an Icelandic volcano.

Airlines said flights were now running at near normal levels but it could take weeks to complete the repatriation of millions of people affected by the disruption worldwide, with some travellers not being offered flights until May.

Eurocontrol said almost all air restrictions had ended with a small number of cancellations due to logistical problems.

Air France-KLM and others announced extra flights.

Norway, which had been among the first countries to respond to last week's volcano eruption by clearing its airspace, reopened its airways on Thursday.

Ryanair's outspoken boss had been criticised by politicians and in newspapers for not committing to reimbursing passengers affected by the closure of airspace.

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