

WORLD

Twin tragedy

Fire and rescue personnel inspect the crash site of two military helicopters in Lumut, western Malaysia, on Tuesday. The accident killed all 10 people on board, the navy said. The helicopters were rehearsing at a naval base for the navy's 90th anniversary celebration. Defense Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin said Saturday's celebration will be canceled and replaced with Friday prayers for the victims.

FIRE & RESCUE DEPARTMENT OF MALAYSIA VIA AP



Briefly

**EUROPE**  
**5 migrants die in Channel crossing bid**  
Five people, including a child, died in an attempt to cross the English Channel from France on Tuesday. The deaths occurred after an overcrowded small boat carrying about 110 people set out to cross the Channel, hours after Britain's parliament passed legislation that will allow the government to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda rather than staying in Britain for processing. Stopping the flow of migrants is a priority for British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government, which says the Rwanda plan will act as a deterrent.

**DJIBOUTI**  
**16 killed, 28 missing as boat capsizes**  
At least 16 people died and 28 were missing in a migrant boat disaster off the coast of Djibouti, the United Nations' International Organization for Migration said on Tuesday. "Tragedy as boat capsizes off Djibouti coast with 77 migrants on board, including children," the IOM said on X, without specifying when the latest incident occurred. The local IOM branch was "supporting local authorities with search and rescue effort", it said. The Ethiopian embassy in Djibouti said the boat was carrying Ethiopian migrants from Djibouti to Yemen.

**BELGIUM**  
**Court clears man whose body produces alcohol**  
A Belgian man was acquitted of drunken driving on Monday because he suffers from auto-brewery syndrome, or ABS, a rare condition whereby the body produces alcohol, his lawyer said. Anse Ghesquiere said three doctors who independently examined her client confirmed he suffered from ABS. Scientists believe the number of ABS cases in the world is underestimated, she said. The court recognized that factors unforeseen by law applied to the man's case and acquitted him of the charge.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

US airlines accused of anti-competitive moves

'Price fixing' targeting direct flights to China sparks outrage among travelers

By MAY ZHOU in Houston  
mayzhou@chinadailyusa.com

US airlines could be suppressing competition as they urge the federal government to stop approving more direct flights between the United States and China, citing their inability to compete with Chinese airlines, observers say.

In a letter addressed to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg on April 11, major US airlines expressed concerns about the competitive advantage enjoyed by Chinese airlines, which can continue to fly a shorter route through Russian airspace, while US carriers are restricted since the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022.

The letter, signed by Airlines for America, Air Line Pilots Association, Allied Pilots Association and the Association of Flight Attendants, also called for limiting US-China flights "until US workers and businesses are guaranteed equality of access in the marketplace, free from the existing harmful anti-competitive policies of the Chinese government".

"This sounds like price fixing by not allowing competition," Matthew Schwartz, a computer engineer in Houston who recently flew to South Korea, said.

"The US airlines only care about protecting their profits, not the interest of air travelers. Any time competition is limited, consumers suffer."

The US carriers' inability to fly a shorter route is not China's fault, he said.

"The US imposed sanctions on Russia by barring Russian carriers flying over US airspace in 2022. Russia did reciprocally," he said. "It's a self-made problem by US

policy. We shouldn't be penalizing China for that."

The alleged advantage of flying over Russian airspace is not entirely valid. FlightAware records showed that Chinese flights recently approved by the US are not flying over Russia, and only 12 Chinese flights to the US that never stopped operating during the pandemic are still using Russian airspace.

In February, the US Transportation Department increased weekly round-trip flights between China and the US to 50 starting from March 31, up from the previous 35.

However, US carriers are not using all those flights. According to a report published by FlightGlobal last month, American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and United Airlines requested and received a 90-day waiver to delay resuming weekly flights to China.

The reluctance stems from concerns that the government might further increase the flights to 100 per week, even though they cannot operate all the existing 50 flights. This hesitation is because of the lack of passenger demand, which has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, American Airlines said.

**Contrasting narratives**

But this situation contrasts with the Transportation Department's rationale for increasing the flights, which was based on market assessments and public interest considerations.

There are other reasons why US carriers want to limit the number of flights, industry insiders said. For example, they have prioritized direct flights to European destinations, which are shorter and more profitable, leading to fewer wide-body planes to operate extra flights.

In addition, the US lacks about 8,000 pilots, according to a study

conducted by consulting firm Oliver Wyman last year. This was because of early retirements during the pandemic, a shrinking pool of potential pilots from the military, and the mandatory retirement age of 65 for pilots that is already older than the general workforce. The gap between pilot supply and demand in 2032 is expected to reach about 13,300.

Many travelers disputed the US carriers' claims, accusing the airlines of caring only about profits and making consumers pay more.

"These excuses the airlines are using to prevent more flights only have one outcome: higher ticket prices for the consumer," a reader called Joshia wrote in a comment on Yahoo. "The only result of fewer flights is higher ticket prices."

Another reader on Yahoo, William, said he regularly flew United Airlines to Shanghai in business class for \$6,500 before the pandemic.

"Last month, I checked prices and it was \$54,000 for a fully refundable ticket, \$12,400 for non-refundable. Of course they don't want to approve more flights; they're able to hammer us on prices right now," he wrote.

The suppressed competition imposed on Chinese airlines by the US also drives up airfares between the US and other major Asian cities, other travelers said.

"I fly to Asia every six weeks, what used to cost business class pre-COVID is now almost double, \$3,600 vs \$6,500 is what I paid two weeks ago," a reader called Shawn wrote. "It's definitely punishing my business travel."

Many readers said the US airlines' request was precisely an example of anti-competition.

"This is yet another sign that the American airline industry cannot compete with Chinese airlines in price and quality of service," reader Imurdad said of the airlines' request. "This is yet another form of protectionism."

First high-speed train set to connect Las Vegas, LA

By RENA LI in Los Angeles  
renali@chinadailyusa.com

Construction has commenced on a \$12 billion high-speed passenger rail line connecting Las Vegas and the Los Angeles area, aiming to cut travel time between the two cities by half.

Brightline West, affiliated with a company already running a swift train service in Florida between Miami and Orlando, plans to lay 351 kilometers of new track.

The track will span from a terminal located just south of the Las Vegas Strip to a new facility in Rancho Cucamonga, California. Most of the route will be constructed along the median of Interstate 15, with a station stop planned for San Bernardino County's Victorville area.

US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who was in Las Vegas for the event, said the project aims to create thousands of union jobs, enhance economic opportunities, alleviate road congestion and reduce air pollution.

"People have been dreaming of high-speed rail in America for decades," he said.

Wes Edens, founder and chairman of Brightline Holdings, hailed the occasion as "the foundation for a new industry" and said the project can connect US cities that are too close for air travel to be practical and too far for convenient driving.

Brightline Holdings CEO Mike Reininger outlined the goal of having the trains running in time for the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles in 2028.

The company secured \$6.5 billion in support from President Joe Biden's administration, comprising a \$3 billion grant from federal infrastructure funds and clearance to issue an additional \$2.5 billion in tax-exempt bonds. It also obtained federal authorization in 2020 to sell \$1 billion in similar bonds.

Las Vegas is a favored driving destination for Southern Californians. Authorities anticipate that the train line will alleviate congestion on Interstate 15, where drivers frequently find themselves stuck in long stretches of slow-moving traffic returning from a Las Vegas weekend.

With the Las Vegas area nearing a population of 3 million and attracting more than 40 million visitors annually, passenger traffic at the

city's Harry Reid International Airport reached a record high of 57.6 million people last year. An average of more than 44,000 vehicles per day crossed the California-Nevada state line on Interstate 15 last year, according to Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority data.

Electric-powered trains will cut the four-hour journey across the Mojave Desert to just over two hours, the project outline said. Projections anticipate accommodating 11 million one-way passengers annually, averaging about 30,000 passengers per day, with fares expected to be substantially lower than air travel costs.

**Further discussion**

The project is the country's inaugural genuine high-speed passenger rail line, boasting speeds of 300 kilometers per hour, akin to Japan's Shinkansen bullet trains. Analysts predict it could serve as a model for similar projects across the United States. Yet, as the country's primary high-speed rail system, it has sparked further discussion on a potential high-speed rail competition between the US and China.

Trains on China's high-speed passenger railways operate at speeds ranging from 250 to 350 kph. The network spans 45,000 km of rail, with plans to expand to 50,000 km by 2025.

In contrast, the US has just 375 route-miles (600 km) of track approved for operation at speeds exceeding 161 kph.

William C. Vantuono, editor-in-chief of railroad industry publication Railway Age, told CNN that many people in the US have no concept of high-speed rail and its value.

"They are hopelessly stuck with a highway and airline mindset," he said.

Rail travel expert Mark Smith told CNN that China has established a high-speed rail network at an unprecedented scale, often surpassing the speed and reliability of domestic flights.

The sheer magnitude of the new stations and the system's remarkable efficiency in transporting large crowds while ensuring reserved seating is "truly impressive," he said. Moreover, the transition from paper tickets to a simple scan of an ID card or passport at the ticket gates adds to the system's "modernity and convenience".

Agencies contributed to this story.



US Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg (center) and others drive rail spikes into a symbolic rail on Monday in Las Vegas. TY ONEIL / AP

International Education Column

If you are interested in this, please contact: [i.education@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:i.education@chinadaily.com.cn)

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