

EUROPE

Athens' new airport not quite ready for take-off

Technical support facility and road linking airport with the city centre are months behind schedule. **Kerin Hope** reports

Set amid olive orchards and vineyards, Athens' new Eleftherios Venizelos airport looks, on the surface, all ready for take-off.

According to the road signs around the site at Spata, east of Athens, the airport will start handling international flights from March next year.

But when members of Iata, the airline industry body, tour the facilities today ahead of discussions on transferring international flights from the old Athens airport at Hellenikon, they will find that not everything at Spata is running to schedule.

The main €2.1bn (\$1.8bn) airport project, carried out by a consortium led by Germany's Hochtief group, was successfully completed and handed over last week, after work which included slicing away a hilltop, and removing intact a 700-year-old Byzantine church from the site.

The new airport is projected to handle 16m passengers a year, rising to 60m a year over the next two decades, serving as a hub for south-eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean.

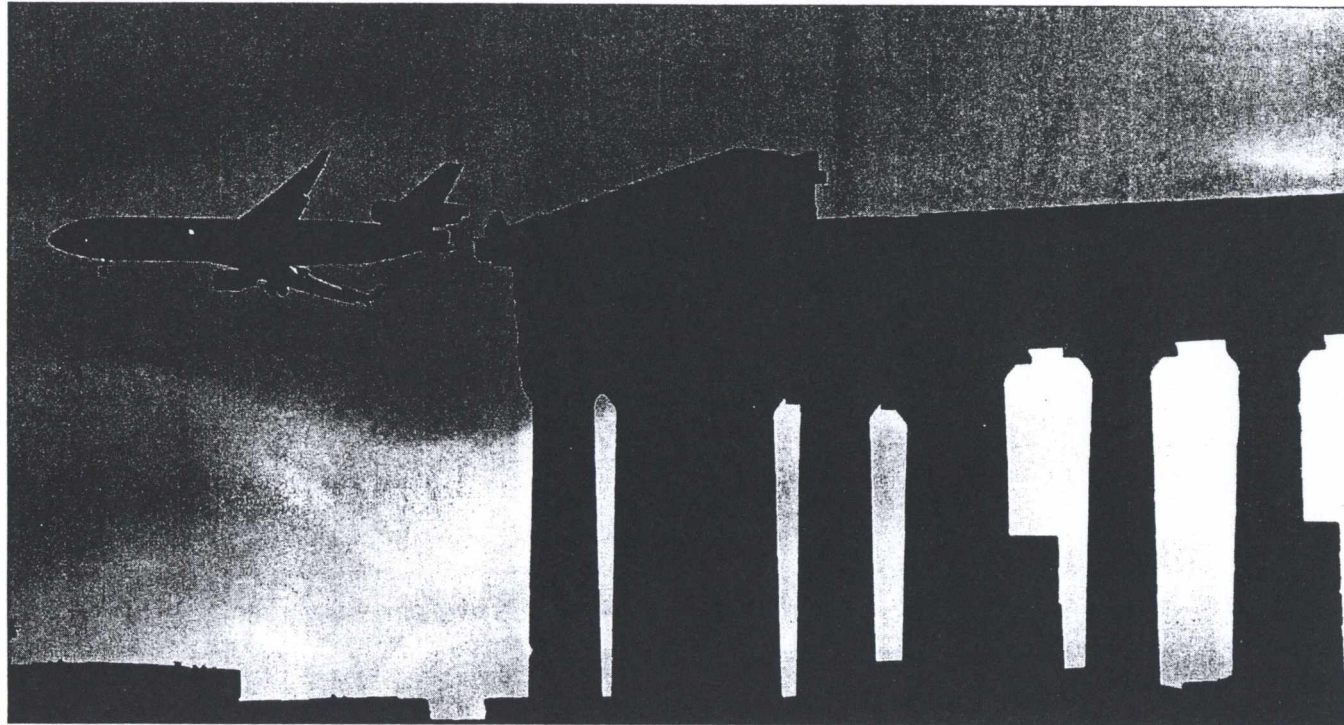
But construction by a Greek consortium of a Dr500bn (\$1.3bn) toll highway linking the new airport with the city centre is running months behind schedule.

So is the technical support facility belonging to Olympic Airways, the struggling Greek state carrier, which will provide maintenance for international airlines using the new airport.

"Even if they worked round the clock, the technical facility couldn't be ready next spring," said a senior Hochtief official. "And whatever promises the contractors may make, it's hard to see the road ready by March 1.

"We're looking at a start-up in June at the earliest, and perhaps not before September. We may miss most of the tourist season," he added.

The problems with the new airport have emerged as Greece is already trying to fend off criticism over the slow pace of preparations for the Athens Olympics in 2004. With construction of sports facilities and related infrastructure lagging behind



An aircraft flies past the Parthenon before landing at Hellenikon, Athens' old airport, recently. The city's new airport is due to open for flights in March 2001

Reuters

schedule, the International Olympic Committee is understood to be considering a possible switch of venue to Seoul, the Korean capital.

Airport officials still insist the airport will open on

time. Executives at the contractors responsible for building a 14km stretch of highway linking the airport with an existing road to the city say they will meet the March deadline.

Attiki Odos, the consortium building the road, has faced problems raising project finance for what will be Greece's first high-speed toll road.

"This was a new experi-

ence for Greece's small family-owned construction companies and inevitably bankers have been cautious," said a Greek banker.

Attiki claims the 26km journey from the city centre

to the new airport will take less than 30 minutes once the toll highway is completed.

But if only the link from the airport is ready, it would take at least 90 minutes to

reach Athens along a congested suburban road.

Even if the road is completed, the international airlines planning to use the airport face further problems. Olympic Airways, as the home-based carrier, is supposed to provide full maintenance for airlines using the new airport, has only just received EU approval for a state subsidy of Dr70bn to finance its transfer from the old Hellenikon site.

"Olympic was slow to get going on the technical facility and construction was delayed because of cash flow problems over the past year," said an airline official. "We hope to offer light maintenance to airlines using the new airport next summer."

The international airlines have other doubts about moving to the Venizelos airport. Several airlines have already protested at landing and fees proposed by Athens International Airport (AIA), the operator.

"The charges look excessive by comparison with mainstream European airports. So why should a big European airline make the switch to a new airport where technical back-up and transport links can't be guaranteed?" said an Athens-based airline executive.