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Travel Association In Spain Urged Air Traffic Controllers Not To Strike To Accept Government Offer

Talks between Spain's airport authority AENA and the USCA union over pay and working conditions broke down late Friday, raising the possibility of a strike this month in the world's second largest tourist destination country.

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Spain's travel companies association urged air traffic controllers Saturday to accept a government offer of arbitration to avoid a strike that could wreak economic havoc at the height of the tourist season.

"If no agreement is reached between the two parties in the next few hours, we demand the unions accept AENA's offer of arbitration and immediately call off the air strike threat," Exceltur, which groups Spain's major hotel chains, travel agents, tour operators and airlines, said in a statement.

The airport authority and the USCA union representing air traffic controllers had been expected to reach an agreement by Friday, after which time AENA said it would aim to settle the matter through arbitration.

In the event the strike threat was not withdrawn and the offer of arbitration rejected, Exceltur said it would hold the air traffic controllers solely responsible for the adverse impact on Spain's tourism sector. "And we will participate in any legal action that companies and sector associations might take in this negative hypothesis," Exceltur said.

The USCA said it remained open to negotiations, which broke down after two days of talks between the two sides.

The government could force the two sides into an arbitration process should it perceive that a strike could cause serious economic damage and delays in service.

Tourism officials and airline authorities have complained the controllers dispute is already imposing serious costs since some travelers have canceled bookings over the walkout threat.

The controllers' relatively high salaries and short working hours have drawn criticism from the Spanish media as the country imposes painful public sector pay cuts to ease its deficit and allay concerns over sovereign debt solvency.