

Israel approves airline agreement with Europe amid protest

JERUSALEM, April 21 (Xinhua) -- The Israeli cabinet on Sunday approved an agreement about increasing flights between Israel and European destinations with the European Council despite protests by workers of the Israeli airlines. According to the agreement, the European airlines will be allowed to increase their flights into and out of Israel for five years starting from 2013, decreasing the flying fees for Israeli travelers. The approval came amid a strike by thousands of workers of Israeli airlines, who suspended international flights starting from 5:00 am (0200 GMT) on Sunday and burnt tires across the cabinet meeting, in protest of the approval. The agreement was initially signed by the Israeli Civil Aviation Authority and the European Commission in July 2012, after three years of negotiations. Finance Minister Yair Lapid said during the cabinet meeting on Sunday that the open skies agreement is good for Israel. "It will lead to lower prices, increase the competition and will not damage the number of jobs," he said, explaining that there would be new job opportunities in the tourism industry as a result of the new deal. Tourism Minister Uzi Landau also celebrated the agreement, saying that "the policy will encourage growth." On the other hand, some ministers rejected the plan. On behalf of the workers, Ofer Eini, head of the Histadrut Labor Federation which embodies workers' unions, said that the deal will cause Israeli airlines to collapse due to the high costs they pay on security fees. He said that thousands of jobs are at risk and that the agreement's authorization should have been postponed in order to improve its terms.