

Resuming Passenger Flights

What is the issue?

- The government moved a fresh amendment in the lockdown guidelines for permitting passenger flights from May 25, 2020 onwards.
- Here are the reasons for the change of Centre's stance in just 3 days, when it had prohibited the services till May 31, 2020.

How badly affected is the aviation sector?

- The airlines were already suffering the ill effects of a pre-Covid-19 economic slowdown that the national lockdown compounded.
- The aviation sector had nearly zero revenues since the countrywide lockdown commenced on March 25, 2020.
- Airlines and the various allied sectors have lost non-recoverable revenue.
- As studied, close to 3 million jobs were at risk in India on account of the stress in the country's aviation sector.
- A low-cost airline sent a mail to its employees warning them of an imminent closure if flight operations did not resume at the earliest.
- There is an imminent threat of more than one airline moving towards closure.
- This is because of both the extended lockdown and little to no relief in the economic package announced.
- [The measures announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for civil aviation comprised the ones that were announced before.
- These included optimisation of Indian airspace, GST relief for the maintenance, repair and overhaul industry and privatisation of airports.]
- These are learnt to be the reasons behind a sudden reversal in the Centre's stance in passenger flights operation.
- [The government also said that the railways were doing much larger operations. So, opening flight operations would absorb a portion of that.]

What were the demands from the airlines side?

- Reportedly, there were increased demands from airline executives to the civil aviation ministry for resumption of services.
- They said they could be forced to sack people en masse and use fleet to pay off mounting debt and would be pushed towards bankruptcy.

- They argued that when trains are free to ferry people from red zones to green zones, why airlines could not fly.
- Moreover, they would mostly be flying from red zones to red zones on routes such as Delhi-Mumbai, or Mumbai-Chennai.
- They emphasized that airlines had more sanitised operating environments.

What are the regulations mandated?

- The civil aviation ministry's note on standard operating procedure sets out the protocol for passengers and the airport staff to follow.
- The reopening of passenger flights operation will start with one-third of operations.
- It is conditional upon strict safety guidelines to be followed at airports and on aircraft.
- Some of them include -
 - i. face masks, gloves
 - ii. social distancing during check-in and in security queues
 - iii. mandatory temperature checks
 - iv. the downloading of the tracking app Aarogya Setu
 - v. a limit on hand luggage
 - vi. no meals on board
- There was also an announcement on capping airfares for 3 months.
- The cap has been decided in 7 categories starting with flights with less than 40 minutes' travel time and in 6 other categories of 30 minutes of incremental travel time.
- Another restriction is that 40% of the seats has to be sold at a fare lower than the midpoint of the maximum fare.

What are the concerns?

- Resuming operations does offer a respite for the airlines that have been stalled.
- However, the airlines are resuming under conditional measures.
- To impose fare caps and ask airlines to follow route dispersal guidelines at this time was unexpected.
- Given the deep uncertainties over economic revival, an extension of the 3-month cap remains a permanent risk.
- Capping pricing will create more complications.
- Further, some of the measures like ensuring the passenger receives SMS receipt upon checking in their baggage will require upgradation to IT systems.
- In all, the limited capacity operations with fare regulation and other added

costs have become a concern for the airlines.

Source: Indian Express, Business Standard

