

Centre pushes Maharashtra to change quarantine, Covid-19 test rules

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The Centre and the Maharashtra government seem to be at odds over the handling of the situation arising out of the Omicron threat. Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan on Wednesday asked the state to align its order with the standard operating procedures (SOPs) issued by the health ministry, a day after the state government revised its guidelines on quarantine for international passengers amid concerns over the new variant of coronavirus.

A senior Maharashtra government official said the issue was being deliberated at the highest level following the central intervention.

With the Omicron variant spreading fast, the Union health ministry issued guidelines for compulsory on-arrival testing for passengers arriving from high-risk countries. Passengers from countries not at risk only need to self-monitor their health for 14 days, and only 2 per cent of such passengers need to undergo a paid Covid test on arrival. The rule came into effect from Wednesday, and over 1,000 passengers each were tested at Delhi and Bangalore international airports on the first day. The health ministry also issued clarifications on various aspects related to tests.

Maharashtra, however, has taken a different position and introduced more stringent rules, including mandatory seven-day institutional quarantine for arrivals from high-risk countries. It also reintroduced after four months RT-PCR tests for domestic passengers, irrespective of vaccination status.

In his letter to Maharashtra Additional Chief Secretary (health) Pradeep Vyas, Bhushan has flagged differences between the central and state rules. Bhushan said Maharashtra's rules were in divergence with the SOPs and guidelines issued by the health ministry and urged the state to do a rethink so as to ensure a uniform implementation of guidelines across the country.

The civic body of Mumbai issued quarantine and test rules on Tuesday night and decided to implement them from Thursday night. This created uncertainty in the travel sector with companies witnessing cancellations and requests for re-routing of inbound tickets via Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai or other cities. Some chose to re-route return flights to India via countries in West Asia by paying high fares. West Asian countries are not in the high-risk category.

"It is too early to assess the impact of the Maharashtra order in general, but because of the fear of the new variant, there has been a slowdown of 15-20 per cent in bookings at industry level," said a senior executive of a private airline.

Ajay Prakash, president of the Travel Agents Federation of India, said states should not make knee-jerk reactions and must evaluate available medical data before taking steps. "I see this (the Maharashtra order) as the last nail in the coffin as far the current inbound season is concerned. For the Maharashtra government to insist on RT-PCR tests even for double-vaccinated domestic passengers seems excessive," he said.

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Maharashtra's decision to introduce separate state-specific rules is not new. As states have powers to legislate on health and disaster management, they have been issuing regulations on RT-PCR tests for travellers or implementing lockdown-like measures to deal with the pandemic.

Currently, Karnataka insists on a negative RT-PCR test on arrivals from Maharashtra and Kerala. Vaccinated passengers from Maharashtra to Karnataka are exempt from the RT-PCR test if travelling for two days, while those from Kerala are subject to home or institutional quarantine measures.

In the past, while states like Odisha, Punjab and Rajasthan required all incoming passengers to have a negative RT-PCR test, others like Delhi and Maharashtra had this requirement only for passengers from selected states. Some states insisted on a report not earlier than 48 hours, while others accepted reports up to 72 hours before travel.