

India delays resumption of regular international flights over Omicron threat

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India has delayed resumption of international flights in view of the emerging threat from the new coronavirus variant Omicron, aviation regulator said on Wednesday.

In view of the evolving global scenario with the emergence of new variants of concern, the situation is being closely watched in consultation with all stakeholders and appropriate decision indicating the effective date of resumption of international flights will be notified soon, DGCA said in a statement.

This follows the DGCA announcement earlier that airlines can resume scheduled overseas flights from 15 December with graded restrictions.

First detected in southern Africa weeks ago, Omicron is known to have spread to over a dozen countries.

The heavily mutated Omicron variant is likely to spread internationally and poses a very high risk of infection surges that could have "severe consequences" in some places, the World Health Organization (WHO) had said earlier.

India is yet to report an infection from the Omicron variant, the country's health minister told the Parliament recently, adding that the government is prepared and ready for any eventuality.

Countries around the world have tightened border controls in an attempt to prevent a recurrence of last year's strict lockdowns and steep economic downturns.

India had suspended international flights from 23 March 2020 amid coronavirus pandemic. However, special international passenger flights have been operating since July last year under air bubble arrangements formed with approximately 28 countries.

Under an air-bubble pact between two countries, special international flights can be operated by their airlines between their territories with specific restrictions.

On the domestic front, airlines have been allowed to operate at full capacity and the air passenger traffic saw a 67% year-on-year and 24% sequential growth to about 8.8 million passengers in October following a revival in travel sentiment during the festival season.

Research is still underway to determine if omicron causes the same level of illness as older versions of the virus, if it can evade protection from vaccines and previous infections, and if it will be able to outcompete the existing strains as the pathogen continues to circulate throughout the world.

Uncertainty about the new variant has triggered global alarm, with border closures casting a shadow over a nascent economic recovery from the two-year-old pandemic.

The government has released a list of at-risk countries that include Hong Kong and Israel where travellers would need to follow additional measures on arrival in India.

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The nations that are currently on the 'at-risk' list of India are – European countries, including the UK, South Africa, Brazil, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Mauritius, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Singapore, Hong Kong and Israel.

The health ministry has asked state governments to boost testing and send all positive Covid samples to INSACOG labs for genome sequencing.

Despite the moves to ramp up both testing and sequencing, some health officials and experts speculate that omicron may already be circulating in the nation.

As many as 8,954 new Covid cases have been reported from India in the last 24 hours and with that the total caseload in the country reached 3,45,96,776.

Currently, there are 99,023 active cases in the country, according to the health ministry. India's active caseload is less than a lakh after 547 days. Active cases account for less than 1% of total cases, currently at 0.29%, lowest since March 2020.

The daily rise in new coronavirus infections has been below 20,000 for 54 straight days and less than 50,000 daily new cases have been reported for 156 consecutive days now.

(With inputs from agencies)