

# **Normal international flights suspended till Jan 31 over Omicron scare**

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Scheduled international flights will remain suspended till January 31 next year, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said in a circular on Thursday.

The decision to extend the suspension comes in the wake of the global spread of the Omicron variant of the novel coronavirus and follows a review of the Covid-19 situation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

While the civil aviation ministry decided to resume scheduled flights from November 26, the decision was formally put on hold on December 1. On Thursday, the DGCA announced its extension till January-end.

Scheduled international flights have been suspended since March 23, 2020, with the imposition of the lockdown to rein in the spread of the contagion. While initially only repatriation flights were permitted, from July 2020 onwards, India began signing air transport bubble agreements with various countries to resume international flights.

While flights under the bubble agreements are scheduled in nature, there are restrictions on airlines under it. For instance, foreign airlines are restricted from selling tickets to onward destinations and in some cases, only point-to-point traffic is allowed.

India has so far signed air transport bubble agreements with 32 countries, including the US, the UK, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Bhutan, and France. The latest country with which an agreement was signed is Switzerland. However, flights are yet to restart to Switzerland.

On Wednesday, 573 international flights were operated to/from India, which is around 47 per cent of the approved flights in the winter schedule of 2019.

A decision was taken to restart scheduled international flights due to pressure from various quarters. A reduction in flights and increased travel demand resulted in a spike in airfares and thus, a clamour to restart scheduled flights.