India to halt domestic passenger flights in ramp-up of virus action

March 23 2020, by Vishal Manve and Aishwarya Kumar In New Delhi

India is grounding all domestic flights in a bid to contain the virus, having already barred international arrivals

India will ground all domestic passenger flights from Wednesday to combat the spread of the deadly new coronavirus, the government said,

as more states ordered lockdowns in the world's second most populous nation.

The move to halt domestic flights—which ferried 144 million passengers as well as cargo across the vast country last year—came as other forms of transport were suspended.

The pandemic "is crippling the global economy and aviation, including India's once-booming aviation sector", said Devesh Agarwal, editor of the Bangalore Aviation website.

"This is not a short-term pandemic and the outlook for Indian aviation looks tragic," he told AFP.

The country of 1.3 billion people has lagged behind others in the number of COVID-19 cases, but there has been a sharp increase in recent days to 468 infections, including nine deaths, according to the government.

A raft of measures has been brought in nationwide and by different states to try and prevent an explosion of cases that could overwhelm the overburdened public health system.

More than 700 million people in 30 states and territories have been ordered into complete lockdowns, according to an AFP tally.

Incoming international flights were banned for a week and many states sealed their land borders and stopped inter-state buses.

More than 700 million people in 19 states and territories have been ordered into complete lockdowns

Sea and river ports were also shut late Monday, the home affairs ministry said, meaning that all incoming passenger traffic into India was now banned.

Indian Railways—one of the world's biggest networks which carries more than 20 million passengers daily—cancelled all services except suburban and goods trains. Intra-state and metro services were also halted.

The measures were welcomed by the World Health Organisation, which said they could "help slow down virus transmission along with the

continued effective measures being taken to isolate, test, treat and trace".

Hitchhiking

Despite the lockdowns—including in the capital New Delhi where borders were sealed, shops and offices closed and local public transport stopped—some residents still moved around.

In Delhi during the evening rush hour, a steady stream of vehicles plied some roads.

The closures have hit poor, rural migrants who have lost their jobs amid the crisis and are trying to return to villages from cities where they were working.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday pleaded with Indians to heed the orders

Inter-state and other bus terminals were packed with migrants trying to go home, while others were waiting along highways to hitch rides back to their villages.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday pleaded with Indians to heed the orders and called on law enforcement to crack down on misbehaviour.

"Many people are still not taking lockdown seriously. Please save yourself, your loved ones (and) take these directions seriously," he tweeted.

A 48-year-old construction worker in Ahmedabad, who gave his name as Manohar, said he was stuck in the western city with 20 others and unable to go home to the eastern state of Bihar some 1,500 kilometres away (930 miles).

"Just getting home would have been a relief to (my children)," he told AFP. "And I would have been assured of a little food at least once a day."

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