

Fliers face hell; chaos swallows city airport

GROUNDING Passengers wait in aircraft
for an hour for take-off; 60 delays

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MUMBAI: Thousands of fliers spent hours crammed inside their planes at Mumbai airport before finally taking off on Monday.

This is because the air traffic control (ATC) sent 60 flights to the back of the take-off queue because they were not ready to take off 15 minutes before their scheduled departure time.

The ATC was following a Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) circular, intended to reduce delays and discipline airlines, which came into effect on Monday at 5 am.

"Earlier, if a flight was delayed we were made to sit at the airport. But now we are stuck inside a congested aircraft. What sort of a rule is this that inconveniences the consumer?" asked Ravi Parwani, a businessman stuck on a Delhi-bound flight for an hour.

Even before the rule came into force, the same number of flights were delayed by at least 30 minutes each because airlines would club flights that were not fully occupied, said two independent sources. They added that the ATC does not have enough staff

WHAT TO EXPECT TODAY

- More flights are expected to get delayed as airlines are not equipped to prevent a repeat of Monday.
- Airlines might even protest the new rule.
- Passengers have little option but to move consumer court.

to handle the load and nor does the airport have enough taxiways and parallel runways. But now, for the first time, the DGCA is holding airlines responsible for the delays.

"Today, flights that respected the rule departed without any delay," said M.G. Jhughare, general manager, ATC (western region). "Most flights that were refused take-off were between 5.15 am and 6. Once airlines realised that we were strictly implementing the rule, things fell into place."

Kingfisher, Indigo, GoAir and Air India declined to say how they plan to prevent a repeat of Monday. Jet Airways said it was working out ways to ease things. Sources in two airlines said they might protest on Tuesday.

» **MAKE AIRLINES PAY, P 2**

'Make errant airlines pay'

TURBULENCE IN THE AIR On Monday, as at least 60 flights were delayed, fliers demanded that tardy airlines be made to pay compensation. A draft policy saying this exists and the passengers' association wants it cleared right away. Expect more delays today

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MUMBAI: While happy with the decision to refuse take-off permission to flights that don't stick to schedule, fliers have demanded that the airlines also be made to compensate them for delays. A draft policy making it mandatory for tardy airlines to compensate fliers was tabled about a month ago, and the Air Passenger Association of India (APAI) demanded on Monday that the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) clear it immediately. Going by procedure, suggestions and objections would have to be invited, after which the draft would go to the Law Ministry for checking. The policy would be enforced only once the Law Ministry clears it.

The APAI demand came soon after Mumbai's Air Traffic Control (ATC) denied take-off clearance to more than 60 flights for late start-ups. It was the first time air traffic managers put an eight-month-old DGCA rule into effect. The rule empowers controllers to temporarily ground a flight if the pilot is not prepared for take-off 15 minutes before the scheduled departure.

"The move will streamline traffic, but ultimately it's the passengers who suffer. It will be more effective if airlines are made to pay compensation for delays," said Milan Zatakia, APAI national vice-president. The passenger body has taken up the matter with the Civil Aviation Ministry and the Ministry of Consumer Affairs.

According to the draft policy, passengers would be eligible for a compensation of Rs 2,000 to Rs 4,000 depending on the delay. On Monday, passengers travelling on flights that were rescheduled because their pilots were not ready on time were stuck inside the aircraft for at least an hour. Those travelling during peak hours were stuck inside for more than two hours. For instance, a 6 am flight that missed its slot was not allowed to take off before 8.30 am.

There have been delays over the past few months because airlines did not stick to schedule. Airport sources told *Hindustan Times* on condition of anonymity that often airlines would take pushback clearance — the first stage of the take-off procedure — to occupy a slot while passengers were still boarding. However, actual take-off would



Aircraft awaiting take-off clearance at Mumbai airport on Monday. At least 60 flights were delayed because the pilots weren't ready on time. VIJAYANAND GUPTA / HT PHOTO

CONSUMER COURT THE LAST RESORT

In India, travellers stranded at airports or on flights have no right to seek compensation from airlines.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has issued a draft policy that proposes a compensation of Rs 2,000 to Rs 4,000 per passenger for delays of more than two hours. However, the draft needs to go through a lengthy procedure first. The Air Passenger Association of India has demanded that it come into force immediately.

So, as of now, you could complain to the DGCA, but it does not guarantee action against airlines.

As a last resort, passengers can approach the consumer court, but the legal process could be long.

ON MONDAY, THOSE TRAVELLING DURING PEAK HOURS WERE STUCK INSIDE THEIR AIRCRAFT FOR MORE THAN TWO HOURS

be well after schedule, thus creating a backlog that was difficult for the airport to manage.

"A flight scheduled to leave at 6 am would start taxiing 30 minutes behind schedule," said a senior airport operations staffer, requesting anonymity as he is not authorised to talk to the media.

As a result, the ATC landed up handling 35 to 40 flight movements an hour whereas its maximum capacity is 30.

"All flights taxi for at least 20 minutes in Mumbai," said Sudhir Baviskar, a tax consultant who flies twice a week on business.

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We were cramped inside the aircraft for no fault of ours. There should be some compensation.

VIMAL GOSAIN (28), management trainee

The airline did not inform us about this rule. The pilot announced it only after the delay.

RAVI PARWANI (42), businessman

My Jetlite flight to Lucknow was delayed by 45 minutes because the pilot was late by 30 seconds in seeking pushback clearance.

MINISHA PATEL (33), media professional

It could be as bad today: Airlines don't have a plan to end delays

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MUMBAI: Despite marathon meetings, airlines were not clear on how to prevent a repeat of Monday's mess at Mumbai airport. Over 60 flights were delayed by at least an hour, held back because the pilots were not ready in time for take-off.

A new Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) circular warned pilots to be ready 15 minutes before departure, failing which the flight would be slotted last in the take-off queue.

Only Jet Airways said it would comply with the new rule from Tuesday.

"We are informing our guests and frequent fliers about the rules," said a Jet spokesperson but did not explain how the airline plans to do it. "We will try our best to minimise inconvenience."

Other domestic carriers did not respond officially to *Hindustan Times*' queries on how they plan to improve the situation on Tuesday.

In fact, there was a hint of defiance. "We are not sure if we want to comply with the circular. Our operations team is working on an alternative strategy," said a senior Kingfisher official requesting anonymity.

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KINGFISHER OFFICIAL, on condition of anonymity

Airlines also called for an emergency meeting with all airport stakeholders to discuss the issue, but could not reach a consensus because the Air Traffic Control (ATC) representative stayed away.

M.G. Jhungare, ATC general manager, told *Hindustan Times* that some international airlines

were happy with the move.

Airlines blamed the airport infrastructure for the problems. "Some parking bays are very far from the tarmac. That's why boarding takes longer," said an Air India official requesting anonymity. Also, he said, taxiing time increases because some taxiways are shut for maintenance.

"We do not have enough aerobridges either. Maintenance work at the airfield increases the time taken by the coach to ferry passengers from terminal to aircraft," said the official.

WHY THE CRACKDOWN?

Mumbai airport has been facing massive congestion and delays in the past few months because airlines did not adhere to the departure slots allotted to them. As a result, Air Traffic Control was forced to handle 35 to 40 landings and take-offs per hour while the capacity is only 30.



GROUND TO AIR

CLOSED Airlines must shut check-in counters at least 40 minutes before scheduled departure.

CLOCK Passenger boarding must be completed and the aircraft door shut 20 minutes before departure.

START ENGINE Fifteen minutes before departure, the pilot should contact Surface Movement Control for pushback — start of the take-off procedure — and start engine for taxiing.

PLANE Pilot gets only five minutes to operate the flight. If he fails to do so, Air Traffic Control will send aircraft to the end of the queue.

STATUS Missing the slot could lead to a delay of up to two hours during peak hours. The average delay could be at least an hour.

1 Minimum number of hours a flight would be delayed if sent to the back of the queue because the pilot is not ready on time

Rs 2,000-4,000

Compensation airlines will have to pay each passenger on a delayed flight once the draft policy is cleared

30 Number of take-offs and landings Mumbai airport is equipped to handle every hour. However, when flights are delayed, it is forced to handle 35 to 40

5 MINUTES: Maximum time a pilot can take between pushback clearance, the first stage of take-off, and being airborne

40 MINUTES: Maximum time that can be taken between check-in counters shutting down and take-off