

Airports near normal despite protest, some flights hit

Airports around the country reported near normalcy Wednesday despite a nationwide de facto strike by some 20,000 employees opposed to the closure of the existing airports in [Bangalore](#) and Hyderabad, but some flights were hit here and there were warnings of more disruptions.

About 500 Indian Air Force (IAF) personnel trained in airfield safety, fire fighting and aircraft marshalling were deployed at 21 major civilian airports to ensure smooth take offs and landings, officials told IANS.

A few flights from the capital's Indira Gandhi International Airport were delayed but operations were not badly affected by the 'non-cooperation movement' called by the Airports Authority of India (AAI) employees.

But officials here admitted that if the 1,700 employees stayed away for long, it would affect baggage handling, sanitation and other ground activities.

Ignoring the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) the government has invoked, the employees are not calling their protest a strike to escape legal action against them.

The de facto strike has been called to oppose the closure of the existing airports in [Hyderabad](#) and Bangalore, where new airports are to open soon as part of a larger makeover of the Indian civil aviation industry.

In Mumbai, the country's commercial capital, about 2,500 AAI employees joined the strike, said AAI Employees Union leader Dilip Gujjar. But operations in the airport, which has been privatised, were near normal.

Officials said that since midnight Tuesday, when the protest began, all domestic and international flights flew out on time.

'We have resources to handle the strike for at least a week,' said the spokesperson for [Mumbai International Airport Ltd \(MIAL\)](#). 'Housekeeping will be outsourced, and for emergency services we have a reserve team.'

But an airport official warned: 'Delays are likely to occur in the latter part of the day as the incoming flights from Kolkata, Hyderabad and small towns may be delayed or cancelled.'

M.K. Ghoshal, a union leader, said the protest would go ahead as talks with the civil aviation ministry failed Tuesday.

At Hyderabad, one of the two focal points of the dispute, union leaders claimed that all 270 employees at the existing Begumpet airport had struck work.

But officials said alternate arrangements had been made to ensure that air traffic was not affected.

The airport at Begumpet in the heart of the city, catering to 250 flights daily, is to be closed down once the new international airport at Shamshabad, 35 km away, becomes operational March 16.

The employees are boycotting their ground handling and emergency duties to demand that the central government pull out of an agreement with the GMR-led consortium, which stipulates that the existing airport will be shut once the airport at Shamshabad becomes functional.

'Our fight is not just for our jobs. It is for the airport, which is making a profit of Rs.2.50 billion every year. Why should it not continue?' asked V.S. Gupta, a union leader.

No disruptions were reported from Bangalore, which too faces closure like the one in Hyderabad on account of a new airport, as well as Ahmedabad.

In Chennai, airport director Dinesh Kumar said both domestic and international terminals functioned normally. Over 15 international and 35 domestic flights had taken off by 9 a.m. Wednesday.

In Kerala, the three international airports in Thiruvananthapuram, Cochin and Kozhikode functioned normally. In the state capital, close to 400 employees were on strike.

'We don't foresee any problem even if the strike continues for three or four days,' said an official of Kozhikode airport.

In the Sikh holy city of Amritsar, 'the operations are completely smooth. Air force personnel are on duty at the airport. International flights from here have not been affected', airport director Arun Talwar told IANS.

The IAF has moved trained personnel from various airfields in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir to Amritsar.

In Chandigarh, airport controller Sunil Dutt said flights were not expected to be hit as requisite backup plans were in place. Bhubaneswar also remained unaffected.

Bhopal's airport director J.P. Alex was confident Wednesday morning that the strike would not affect air traffic from there.

Nevertheless, the authorities are urging passengers to check the status of their flights with the airlines before leaving for airports.

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