

Government asked to consider keeping old Bangalore airport open

The Supreme Court Monday asked the central government to consider keeping Bangalore's old airport open taking into account possible problems citizens might face as the new airport is 40 kilometres away from the city.

A bench of Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan and Justice R.V. Raveendran, however, refused to prevent the central government from opening the new airport.

'We are concerned about the problems of the citizens,' the bench observed, while asking the central and the Karnataka governments to consider the option of keeping the old airport open.

Responding to the bench's concern, Additional Solicitor General Gopal Subramaniam said the government will consider the citizens' concerns in accordance with the law during a meeting scheduled May 12.

The bench then asked the government to keep the citizen groups posted about the outcome of the meeting.

It was hearing a public interest lawsuit filed by a Bangalore-based NGO which contended that the decision to close down the existing Hindustan Aeronauticals Limited (HAL) airport in [Bangalore](#) was unilateral and arbitrary.

The petitioner, the Bangalore City Connect Foundation, had contended that Devanahalli, where the new airport has come up, is 40 km away from the city centre and the connectivity between the two was poor.

It would take hours for passengers to travel to the new airport, it contended.

The NGO said that if the old airport is closed down, the residents of Bangalore would be constrained to spend hours travelling on the congested road to the new airport and this would negate the very purpose of air travel.

Senior counsel Harish Salve, appearing for the NGO, said the HAL airport can be used for short-haul domestic flights for the convenience of the public and the government should not have any objection to this demand.

The NGO had come to the apex court, challenging an order of the Karnataka High Court, which had April 17 refused its plea seeking a direction to the central government and the Airports Authority of India (AAI) against closing down of the HAL airport for commercial operations.

The high court, however, had directed the two governments and AAI to renegotiate with Bangalore International Airport Ltd (BIAL), the promoters of the new international airport at Devanahalli, on the levy of user development fee (UDF) on passengers, in the public interest.

Meanwhile, the government last week said it had given the operators of the new airport the option of allowing aircraft less than 80-seater to operate out of the existing airport.

According to the NGO, 'the high court clearly erred in failing to direct continued operation of the HAL airport while itself directing the Union of India to renegotiate the terms of the concession agreement on this issue.'

The central government, the state government, the AAI and BIAL had opposed the petition saying that HAL was a defence airport and its use for civilian purposes was likely to jeopardise flight safety.

Moreover, the Concession Agreement between BIAL and the central government in July 2004 specifically provided for the closure of the existing airport for commercial civil aviation once the new airport became operational, the promoter stated.

It further said the closure clause was an essential and integral part on the basis of which the new airport was to be set up.

The new airport, after a delay, is slated to be launched later this month.

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