India set to resume overseas flights, tightens screening for new COVID-19 variant

NEW DELHI: - India said on Friday it will resume international passenger flights from mid-December with COVID-19 linked curbs for "at risk" countries, and ordered tightened screening at borders as fears over a new coronavirus variant spread globally.

The federal health ministry said reports of mutations in the variant, identified as B.1.1.529, had "serious public health implications", and asked states to adopt rigorous screening and testing for all passengers from South Africa and other "at risk" countries.

"This variant is reported to have a significantly high number of mutations, and thus, has serious public health implications for the country in view of recently relaxed visa restrictions and opening up of international travel," health secretary Rajesh Bhushan said in a letter to states late on Thursday.

But India's civil aviation ministry said it had decided to let airlines resume scheduled international flights from Dec. 15, lifting a nearly two-year-old ban imposed to stem the spread of COVID-19.

The resumption of flights would be based on the coronavirus risk levels of individual countries, according to a formal government order.

Some countries in Europe and Asia have rushed to tighten border controls and restrict travel because of the new variant.

India's foreign ministry said there was no immediate information on steps the government was taking.

"This is a developing incident," foreign ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi told a news conference.

The federal health ministry did not respond to a Reuters request for further comment.

On Friday, the UK Health Security Agency said the new variant has a spike protein that was dramatically different to the one in the original coronavirus that COVID-19 vaccines are based and could make existing vaccines less effective.

Britain has banned flights from six African countries, and asked returning British travellers from those destinations to quarantine.

India, the world's second-worst affected country by COVID-19, posted the smallest rise in new cases in one-and-a-half years this week, due to increased vaccinations and antibodies in a large section of its population from previous infections.

Its total cases of coronavirus reached 34.56 million on Friday. India's daily caseload has halved since September and it reported 10,549 new cases on Friday.

Earlier this month, India identified 10 countries "at risk" including Europe, China, South Africa, and New Zealand, among others, and has opened its borders to 99 countries overall.

Indian shares fell more than 2% on Friday, in line with declines in markets across Asia as investors fled risky assets panicking over the potential impact of the new variant.

reuters

Prices for greenhouse tomatoes in Uzbekistan are breaking records: will they continue to rise?

Prices for greenhouse tomatoes in Uzbekistan are breaking records: the average wholesale prices for red round tomatoes have grown by 30% over the past week, and by 3.7 times over the past two months. The current prices are several times higher than those recorded on the same date in previous years, EastFruit analysts note.

The dynamics of prices for greenhouse tomatoes in September-November 2021 differs significantly from that in the same period in 2019 and 2020. In previous years, the increase in prices for greenhouse tomatoes began in the second half of October and early November, but in 2021, the average wholesale prices for greenhouse tomatoes started to increase on the 20th of September. Subsequently, the trend continued in October and November 2021 at a much higher pace than in previous years.

Russia is the largest importer of Uzbek tomatoes they import 52% of the total volume of fresh tomatoes exported from Uzbekistan in 9 months of 2021. At the same time, the potential for growth in tomato prices in Uzbekistan has not yet been exhausted, since prices on the Russian market grew faster than on the Uzbek market then.

The upward trend in prices in the Russian market continued until the end of October 2021, but then the average wholesale prices for greenhouse tomatoes began to decline. They fell by 33% over the last week, while in Uzbekistan, prices are still rising. Opposite price dynamics for greenhouse tomatoes and their sharp decline on the Russian market over the past week have led to a narrower gap between prices in Russia and Uzbekistan, and to the average wholesale prices being higher in Uzbekistan than in Russia.

UN upgrades Nepal & Bangladesh to group of developing nations

DHAKA: The UN General Assembly has adopted a historic resolution to graduate three nations, including Bangladesh and Nepal, from the least developed country (LDC) category to the developing country grouping, a major milestone demonstrating the countries' significant development progress

The UNGA adopted the resolution at its 76th session. The three countries that got clearance for graduation are Bangladesh, Nepal and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. "

"The three countries will graduate from the LDC category after an exceptionally extended preparatory period of five years (the standard period is of three years) to enable them to prepare for graduation while planning for a post-Covid-19 recovery and implementing policies and strategies to reverse the economic and social damage incurred by the Covid-19 shock," the UN said on Wednesday.

"UNGA adopts historic resolution to graduate Bangladesh from the LDC category. What better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our independence... Fulfillment of national aspiration and PM's vision for 2021," Bangladesh's permanent representative to the UN Rabab Fatima tweeted on Wednesday.

"This is a historic milestone to the development journey of Bangladesh. This is the reflection of the progress for more than a decade. People of all walks of life are part of this success," finance minister AHM Mustafa Kamal was quoted as saying by Daily Star newspaper on Thursday.

Currently, there are a total of 46 countries on the LDC list, according to the UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP). According to the UN, per capita income of $1,230 is one of the requirements for transitioning into a developing nation. indiatimes

KSA allows direct entry from Pakistan, five other countries

ISLAMABAD: Saudi Arabian General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) on Friday announced it will allow direct entry to the travelers from six countries, including Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia suspended all the international flights in March 2020, following the coronavirus outbreak. The suspension was lifted in May this year, but was not applicable to many countries due to the pandemic situation.

To arrive in the kingdom, the travelers from the countries, facing the travel ban, had to spend 14 days in a third country unless they had valid residency permits and were fully vaccinated against the Covid-19 in Saudi Arabia.

In a notification issued, the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) said it was allowing the direct entry to the Kingdom from the countries which include Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, Vietnam, Egypt and India without the need to stay 14 days outside these countries before entering the Kingdom. The travelers coming from these countries are still required to spend five days in quarantine upon arrival, regardless of their immunisation status outside the kingdom.

Kazakhstan: Energy shortages push crypto miners to the exit

Kazakhstan's crypto-mining industry boomed on the back of favorable legislation and China's de facto ban this summer, but an electricity bust is now sending some operations toward the exits.

Industry players were warning as early as the summer that the country's energy system did not have the capacity to satisfy so many power-hungry miners vacating China, a trend that has made Kazakhstan the second-biggest crypto-mining center in the world.

That prediction has proven correct, as shortages have seen the grid restrict power to mining operations, handicapping them in the grand chase for bitcoins.

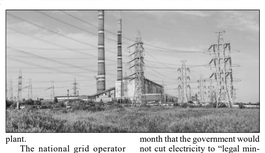
Earlier this week, the co-founder of the local Xive.io mining company said it had packed up its 2,500-machine farm due to cuts in the supply of electricity to its operation in the southern city of Taras. "Country risk played out," Bckbau wrote on Twitter, noting that other southern miners were facing a similar crunch.

Vast Kazakhstan has three electricity grids. While the northern grid produces a surplus and the western grid is more or less self-sufficient, the south is now seeing a deficit.

Transfers from the north to the south are plagued by inefficiencies.

In an interview this week with private news website Tengrinews, energy expert Almaz Abyldayev estimated that up to 70 percent of electricity can be lost in some transfers.

This season's sudden surge in electricity consumption, which at 8 percent since the beginning of 2021 is around quadruple the growth of previous years, has forced Kazakhstan to turn to Russia to pick up the slack and consider building a nuclear power plant.



The national grid operator KEGOS is certain miners are responsible.

Yet supporters of big-farm mining insist that relocations of major operations from China are a small part of the problem.

The bigger issue, said Alan Dorjiyev, head of the Almaty-based Association of Blockchain and Data Center Industry, a lobby, is a boom in so-called gray miners attracted to the sudden fire sale of mining equipment from China and the rising value of cryptocurrencies to all-time highs this year. Operations falling under this umbrella could be either relatively large mines illegally connected to the grid, or mom-and-pop operations with three mining computers working out of a basement, Dorjiyev told Eurasianet.

"In Almaty, we are seeing a growth in electricity of something like 12 percent. We know there are not so many large farms here, so our conclusion is that the general population has started mining," he added.

Dorjiyev noted that household mining operations with no more than three computers could expect a return on their equipment investments in less than 18 months with bitcoin's present price above $50,000.

Kazakhstan's government is still keen on the white-gray distinction.

Energy Minister Magzum Mirzagaliyev said earlier this month that the government would not cut electricity to "legal miners."

"These are businessmen who have invested a lot of money, and the state should act, let's say, as a consistent and reliable partner. Once we give our permission, you cannot revoke it," Mirzagaliyev said. A November 25 report by the Financial Times found that even these miners are now living with cuts, however.

Mathew Heard, a U.S.-based software developer interviewed by the FT complained that his 33 bitcoin mining machines in Kazakhstan were only working 55 percent of the time since he first began experiencing shutdowns this month.

Heard's machines are managed by Enegix, a company whose data centers are so white that they have even seen Kazakh officials show up for openings.

The same report calculated that at least 87,849 power-intensive mining machines were brought to Kazakhstan from China.

But the national grid's woes haven't put everybody off.

Canaan, a China-based computer hardware manufacturer that this summer set up a service center in Kazakhstan, went through with its delivery of more than 2,000 machines to the country, it said on November 23. The company has said in the past that it plans to work with three local companies "registered with the energy ministry," eurasianet