

'DO OWN GROUND HANDLING AT NON-MAJOR AIRPORTS'

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The civil aviation ministry has written to all airlines to hire their own staff to do ground handling at non-major airports. At various smaller airports, the airlines outsource the ground handling work, as it is cheaper for them to do so.

On the other hand, the ministry has been trying for quite a while to get the airlines to stop doing ground handling (GH) at six major airports — Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad.

At these, each airline has its own staff for GH work and they've together been staunchly resisting the ministry's decision, taken prior to 2007, to have no more than three ground handlers at these airports — one being government-owned Air India's, a second being the airport operator, in alliance with a partner, with the third handler to be chosen by competitive bidding.

The ministry had proposed to introduce this GH policy from 2007, but implementation has been repeatedly postponed, with the airlines saying their unique selling proposition will be compromised if they give ground handling to others at these airports.

The issue has gone to the Supreme Court and a final hearing on the airline case challenging the GH policy will be in mid-July.

However, as noted, it is the reverse case on airports other than these, with the government saying it wants the airlines to take on the job and the latter finding no reason to do so.

"We have written to all the airlines asking them to hire their own ground handling staff at all the (non-major) airports. This is not a new policy. They were always required to keep their own staff for ground handling but that was never followed by the airlines. And now this has become a trend, which should not be continued," said a senior ministry official, who did not want to be identified.

GH includes general administration, baggage, freight and mail handling, loading and unloading of aircraft and transport of crew, passengers and baggage, fuel and oil handling and catering services. There are around 90 operational airports across the country. Of which 12 are ranked major airports, which cater to 1.5 million passengers a year.

The official said that at various smaller airports there is only one ground handler, who caters to all the airlines. "The airlines should immediately do this. They can shift their staff coming out of (major) airports after the (new) ground handling policy (for the six majors) is implemented to other airports," he said.

The new policy for the six major airports was conceived in the wake of the terrorism threat. It was argued that GH agents employed by private airlines had also contributed to the rise in accidents at airports. However, the airlines contended they were bound to ensure security and were being supervised by the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security