

## Over 60 UDAN airports to have similar security blanket

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More than 60 airports operational in tier-two and tier-three cities under the Centre's regional connectivity scheme UDAN will soon be brought under a comprehensive anti-terror security cover of armed CISF personnel with the deployment of around 1,650 troops, officials said. The proposal is awaiting final policy sanction from the home ministry. The bureau of civil aviation security (BCAS), in consultation with the ministry of civil aviation and the CISF, finalised the proposal for the "very important security measure" required for the safety of passengers taking flights from small air terminals across India.

Some airports such as Shimla which are under the regional connectivity scheme, are being guarded by the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) while the rest are secured by various state police forces or their special armed units and there is no uniform policy.

The regional connectivity scheme was launched under the name of UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik) on October 21, 2016, by the Union government to stimulate regional air connectivity and make air travel affordable to the masses residing in tier-2 and tier-3 cities and towns.

The civil aviation ministry is the regulating agency while the Airports Authority of India (AAI) is responsible for implementing the ambitious scheme of the Narendra Modi government.

According to the fresh blueprint accessed by PTI, 57 security personnel will be deployed at each of the airports operational under the UDAN scheme, with 27 armed personnel drawn from the CISF and the rest sourced from certified private security agencies.

The CISF is the national civil aviation security force as it guards 66 major domestic and international airports in the country.

A senior home ministry official said, "The CISF will get the fresh manpower to guard all the UDAN airports from the pool of 3,049 posts that were abolished recently, from the airports that it is guarding, and replaced by hiring a total of 1,924 private security personnel for these tasks."

The state government concerned and the AAI will provide lodging facilities for the 57 personnel that are supposed to be deployed at each airport under the regional connectivity scheme, apart from putting in place security gadgets and equipment such as hand-held metal detectors for passenger frisking and baggage scanning x-ray machines, officials said.

These facilities need not be in the airport premises as the terminals are very small and there are very limited flights from there. The lodging facilities can be provided at a nearby government barrack or residential unit and in some cases the CISF will draw its manpower from its nearest available security unit from where the troops can undertake a short trip, to be in place before the departure, they said.

"As the passenger tickets under the UDAN scheme are priced low, the proposal sent to the home ministry has kept costs in check and security measures effective," a senior security officer said.

The CISF will be overall in charge of the anti-terror and anti-hijack cover. It will also ensure surveillance and protection of the terminal on a quick reaction team (QRT) model where troops are stationed at vantage points to thwart any terrorist attack attempt, he said.

According to the blueprint, the CISF will deploy close to 1,650 personnel for the protection of airports under the regional connectivity scheme while the private security personnel for each airport will be certified and given a licence by the BCAS.

"The airports under regional connectivity scheme are as important as any other large airport. The fresh proposal aims to provide these small airports with a comprehensive armed security cover and it is expected to be notified as a policy soon," the home ministry official said.

Nearly 1.15 crore Indians who had never before taken a flight were able to experience air travel through the UDAN scheme, Union Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia had informed the Parliament during the recently concluded session in December.

He said 11 airlines are currently part of UDAN, out of which three are startups, whereas 70 new airports have been established. "Apart from these, we are going to establish 68 new airports by the end of 2024 towards diversification of civil aviation sector," the minister had said.

More than 2.15 lakh UDAN flights have been operated. The scheme has been able to provide air connectivity to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities at affordable airfares and has transformed the way people travel, the minister said in the reply.

The government of India has approved a budget of Rs 4,500 crore for the revival of existing unserved or underserved airports and airstrips of the state governments, AAI, public sector undertakings and civil enclaves, he had said.

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