

Pakistan airspace closure forces Indian airlines to reroute flights

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Dhaka: Top Indian carriers Air India and IndiGo are facing longer flight times and increased fuel costs after Pakistan closed its airspace to Indian airlines.

The restriction follows escalating tensions between the two countries over a deadly militant attack in Indian-administered Kashmir.

India has blamed Pakistan-based elements for Tuesday's assault in Pahalgam, which left 26 people dead. Pakistan has denied any involvement.

In response to the incident, both countries have imposed a range of retaliatory measures. India has suspended a critical river water-sharing treaty, while Pakistan has closed its airspace to Indian airlines.

However, international carriers are not affected by this ban.

A Civil Aviation Ministry source told, "Flights will now have to take the route over the Arabian Sea. There is no other option. It will definitely take much longer for passengers and cost overheads for airlines before the destinations are reached."

The effects of the airspace closure became apparent on Thursday (April 24) evening, as Air India and IndiGo began rerouting flights to destinations like New York, Azerbaijan, and Dubai—routes that typically pass through Pakistani airspace, according to flight tracking data from the industry.

New Delhi, one of the world's busiest airports, will be the hardest hit, as many flights from the city cross Pakistani airspace en route to the West and the Middle East.

According to industry data, Indigo, Air India and its budget subsidiary Air India Express together have some 1,200 flights scheduled from New Delhi to Europe, the Middle East, and North America in April.

Air India, Indigo, Air India Express, Spice jet and Akasa Air are among the airlines set to be impacted by the move.

Air India on Thursday (April 24) said in a statement; "Due to the announced restriction of Pakistan airspace for all Indian airlines, it is expected that some Air India flights to or from North America, UK, Europe, and Middle East will take an alternative extended route."

The Tata-owned airline added that it regrets the inconvenience caused to our passengers due to this unforeseen airspace closure that is outside its control.

"We would like to reiterate that at Air India, the safety of our customers and crew remains top priority," Air India stated.

For Air India, flights to the Middle East from New Delhi will now face an additional hour of travel, resulting in higher fuel costs and less space for cargo due to the extra fuel, an Indian aviation industry executive, who asked to remain anonymous, told news agency.

IndiGo stated on Friday (April 25) that "a few" of its flights will be affected. "...a few of our international flights are being impacted. We understand the inconvenience this may cause and our teams are doing their best to help you reach your destination at the earliest," the airline

said.

Aviation industry analysts said on Friday that Air India is the most affected due to its extensive long- and ultra-long-haul network out of Delhi.

This airspace closure adds to the growing list of challenges facing India's airline industry, which is already dealing with delays in aircraft deliveries from Boeing and Airbus. Fuel and oil costs typically account for about 30pc of an airline's operating expenses, making it the largest cost component.

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News agency on Friday quoted an airline staff saying the airspace closure would disrupt flight schedules, requiring airlines to reassess their flight hours in accordance with regulations, and adjust crew and pilot rosters.

Another airline executive spoke to the news agency also revealed that the carrier was scrambling to assess the situation, with some employees working late into the night on Thursday. Both sources spoke on condition of anonymity.

On Thursday, IndiGo flight 6E1803 from New Delhi to Baku took 5 hours and 43 minutes via a longer route that bypassed Pakistan, flying southwest over India's Gujarat state, over the Arabian Sea, and then north over Iran to Azerbaijan.

In contrast, the same flight took just 5 hours and 5 minutes on Wednesday when flying through Pakistani airspace.

Meanwhile, Indigo has cancelled its routes to Almaty in Kazakhstan and Tashkent in Uzbekistan until May 7.

"Approximately 50 international routes operated by IndiGo will require longer sectors and hence may be subject to some slight schedule adjustments. With the same restrictions and limited rerouting options, unfortunately Almaty and Tashkent are outside the operational range of IndiGo's current fleet," stated an Indigo statement.

