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Storms in Delhi cause 75 flight diversions in May

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Dhaka: As Delhi moves into the peak of the pre-monsoon season, skies over IGI Airport have become increasingly turbulent—quite literally.

According to the agency, six major thunderstorms in May alone disrupted flight operations, leading to over 75 diversions and hundreds of delays.

The most severe disruption came on May 25, when stormy weather forced the diversion of 49 flights, marking it as one of the most chaotic days for air travel this summer.

While thunderstorms typically last only a few minutes, their impact ripples through the aviation network for hours.

“Of all the weather-related hazards, thunderstorms have the highest impact on aviation across the world,” TOI quoted R K Jenamani, senior scientist at the India Meteorological Department (IMD), as saying.

These storms, often accompanied by lightning, gusty winds, squalls, and even hail, pose serious challenges during takeoff, cruising, and landing phases of flight.

Frequent wind direction shifts during storms prevent safe takeoffs and landings. On May 2, an intense storm with a squall reaching 74 kmph forced the diversion of three flights and delayed over 500 others.

A similar squall on May 17 led to six "go-arounds", a safety maneuver where pilots abort landing attempts and circle back, while more than 300 flights experienced delays.

Historically, Delhi averages 45 thunderstorms annually, with around 29 occurring between May and August. A study titled ‘Characteristics of Thunderstorms and Squalls over IGI Airport’, as reported by TOI, analyzing data from 1995–2005, noted the highest thunderstorm activity in June, followed by July, with squalls most frequent in May and June.

“More than 80pc of thunderstorms in each season are of duration less than 3 hours,” the study found, with peak pre-monsoon activity typically occurring between 12:00 and 15:00 UTC.

Flight turbulence during storms is often caused by unstable air currents-strong updrafts that can lift aircraft suddenly, followed by downdrafts that may cause them to drop altitude rapidly. These conditions not only disrupt schedules but also pose safety challenges.

Weather remains a significant factor in aviation incidents globally. A study titled ‘Bad Weather and Aircraft Accidents – Global Vis-à-vis Indian Scenario’ revealed that 21pc of aircraft accidents in India between 1992 and 2008 were weather-related, compared to 26–32pc worldwide.

In both India and the US, wind-related issues accounted for the highest share of these incidents.

In May 2018, about 70 Delhi-bound flights were diverted due to storms—then considered one of the worst impacts in recent memory. Last month’s figures now surpass that, marking a sharp reminder of the growing challenge weather poses to aviation.

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