

Tougher penalties for airline hoaxers

- A Monitor Desk Report

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New Delhi: The government has revised laws related to passenger aircraft safety, introducing stricter penalties for individuals making hoax bomb threats. Such offenders can now be placed on a no-fly list or deboarded from the plane. Additionally, they will face charges under laws addressing the gravest aviation security violations, such as attempted hijacking, smuggling explosives onto aircraft, or taking hostages.

This amendment to the Aircraft Security Rules comes in response to a series of hoax bomb threats targeting Indian airlines in November, which caused significant flight delays and diversions. In two instances, fighter jets were scrambled to escort Indian carrier planes to safety during their landings.

As many as 1,143 hoax bomb threats were made to domestic airlines between August 2022 and November 13, 2024, with a sharp increase

this year, according to government data. Of these, 994 hoax threats were reported in 2024 alone, the civil aviation ministry informed the Parliament last month. The amendment became necessary since the Safety of Civil Aviation Act (SUASCA), in its original form, was limited to offences committed when an aircraft is mid-air. "We want to take strict action against people who are behind this when there is a fake or hoax threat that they are trying to do; we have to cover the act on the ground and the airport also," civil aviation minister Ram Mohan Naidu said recently. The Centre had also made changes to the practice of responding to bomb threats after it found a pattern of anonymous social media handles giving out threats, which were later deleted.

Earlier, the response procedure stipulated that any message or call with a flight number is considered a specific threat. As per the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) protocol, an aircraft facing a threat was required to land at the nearest possible airport, after which it was inspected. This changed to where once a particular threat is found to be a hoax, similar messages from that account need not be treated as specific and the aircraft is allowed to fly to its destination. This was done to minimise diversions causing financial loss and passenger inconvenience. If a threat is found to be substantial, the air traffic control subsequently informs the airport which mobilises various resources including fire brigade, bomb disposal squads, sniffer dogs, and in some cases, emergency evacuation systems.

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