

Why IndiGo has been hit so hard by new flight duty time limitation rules, explained

Indigo Flight Cancellations | NEW FDTL Rules Explained: The new FDTL rules apply to all domestic airlines, so why has IndiGo been so severely affected, and the others not so much?

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IndiGo has been caught ill-prepared for the new rules. On Wednesday alone, around 200 of the carrier's flights were estimated to have been cancelled. (Photo: IndiGo)

Indigo Flight Cancellations: IndiGo has [seen scores of flight cancellations and delays over the past few days, affecting thousands of fliers.](#) The primary reason for this disruption with

the airline — India's largest, accounting for over 60 per cent of domestic passenger traffic — are crew shortages in the wake of the new Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) norms

The second and final phase of the new crew rest and duty rules was implemented last month, and IndiGo has been caught ill-prepared.

Only 19.7 per cent of its flights operated on time on Wednesday (December 3), down from 35 per cent on Tuesday and around 50 per cent on Monday.

The disruption has led to chaos at various Indian airports. Social media was replete with IndiGo passengers expressing their frustration at long delays and cancellations. Many also complained that they had to take expensive flights with other carriers due to the disruption.

IndiGo apologised and initiated "calibrated adjustments" to its flight schedule, which involve rescheduling and cancellation of some flights to stabilise operations in line with crew availability. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has also stepped in, asking the airline to present the "facts leading to the current situation" and submit mitigation plans.

The new FDTL rules apply to all domestic airlines, so why has IndiGo been so severely affected? According to industry insiders, the answer lies in a number of factors, including IndiGo's massive scale of operations and a high-frequency network, significant number of late night and wee hour flights, and its model of high aircraft and crew utilisation levels.

Also, other Indian carriers are at present operating at lower-than-optimal aircraft utilisation levels due to reasons like delayed new aircraft deliveries and planes grounded for refit. This gives them more flexibility in crew rostering as more pilots are available relative to their fleet sizes.

New FDTL norms and IndiGo

Under the new FDTL rules, the weekly rest period for pilots has been increased to 48 hours from 36 and night landings have been limited to two from six earlier. This is learnt to have impacted IndiGo's crew rostering significantly. The norms have also extended the definition of night hours by an hour, imposing additional constraints on the airline's operations. The new rules are aimed at better combating pilot fatigue, a key risk in aviation safety.

These rules were initially going to be implemented from June 2024, but the rollback was delayed following pushback from IndiGo and other airlines. The airlines' primary argument was that the new norms would require more crew strength, and they wanted the

implementation in a step-by-step manner over an extended period. However, the rules were implemented this year by the DGCA following a direction from the [Delhi](#) High Court.

They were rolled out in two phases, in July and November.

While IndiGo managed the first phase—which included longer weekly rest periods for crew—without much impact, the second phase, requiring curtailed crew utilisation levels for the ‘red eye’ flights, has hit IndiGo a lot harder than other carriers. Under the new FDTL rules, permitted night landings for flight crew are now restricted to two, from six earlier.

A champion of the low-cost carrier model, IndiGo's aircraft and crew utilisation levels are higher than other Indian carriers. The airline also has more high-volume night-time flights than the others. With its fleet of over 400 aircraft, IndiGo operates over 2,300 flights a day, connecting over 90 domestic and 45 international destinations. And it does so with a lean staffing model.

Even a 10 per cent flight cancellation rate would mean over 230 cancelled flights for IndiGo. By contrast, the next biggest airline group, Air India, operates less than half the number of flights.

A narrow-body aircraft like the Airbus A320—which forms the bulk of IndiGo's fleet—usually operates multiple flights a day. This means that delays and cancellations can quickly cascade. The situation becomes worse if flight crews reach their duty hour caps due to delays and the airline has to scramble for a replacement crew.

Mitigation measures

According to the DGCA, IndiGo informed the regulator that it had 1,232 flight cancellations in November, 755 of which were due to crew and FDTL-related constraints, 258 were due to airspace and airport restrictions, 92 were due to air traffic control system failure incidents, while 127 were due to various other reasons. The airline's on-time performance (OTP) also worsened in November to 67.7 per cent from 84.1 per cent in October. With widespread disruption in early December, the OTP of IndiGo, which has for long prided itself as India's most punctual airline, has crashed further.

In a statement on Wednesday evening, the airline said that a multitude of “unforeseen operational challenges” have disrupted its flight operations. These, according to the airline, include minor technology glitches, schedule changes linked to the winter, adverse weather

conditions, increased congestion in the aviation system, and the full implementation of the new FDTL rules.

As per the DGCA, IndiGo is also strengthening crew planning and rostering while adhering to FDTL norms, enhancing coordination with air traffic control (ATC) and airports to manage capacity constraints, and improving its turnaround and disruption-management processes.

Pilot groupings blame IndiGo

Pilot associations have claimed the carrier was not prepared for the new FDTL rules despite sufficient notice. Airline Pilots' Association of India (ALPA) said the flight disruptions reflected a failure of proactive resource planning by dominant airlines, adding that there could be an effort to pressurise the DGCA to dilute the new norms.

The Federation of Indian Pilots (FIP) said that the disruption is a direct consequence of IndiGo's "prolonged and unorthodox lean manpower strategy across departments, particularly in flight operations". It also claimed that there are growing concerns that the flight delays and cancellations may be used to "arm-twist regulators" whenever rules do not suit the airlines.

"Despite the two-year preparatory window before full FDTL implementation, the airline inexplicably adopted a hiring freeze, entered non-poaching arrangements, maintained a pilot pay freeze through cartel-like behavior, and demonstrated other short-sighted planning practices," the FIP said in a statement.

The grouping also claimed that following the rollout of the first phase of the new FDTL rules on July 1, IndiGo reduced pilot leave quotas, and after the second phase roll-out, tried to buy back pilot leave. According to the FIP, these measures further damaged pilot and employee morale at the airline, "especially in a year when airline executives took home record increments approaching or exceeding 100 per cent, while simultaneously blaming pilot migration instead of investing in retention and workplace improvements".

The two pilot associations also urged the DGCA to approve seasonal flight schedules only after airlines prove they have adequate pilot strength under the new FDTL norms, instead of depending on historical slot usage and the carriers' proposed flight schedules.

"If IndiGo continues to fail in delivering on its commitments to passengers due to its own avoidable staffing shortages, FIP urges DGCA to consider re-evaluating and reallocating slots

to airlines such as Air India, Akasa Air and others who have the capacity to operate them without disruption during the peak holiday and fog season,” the FIP said.

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