'We intend a phased escalation ... Indian aviation will come out stronger from this crisis'

WITH DOMESTIC airline operations resuming on May 25, the Ministry of Civil Aviation on Thursday issued a sweeping set of guidelines meant to prepare air travel for COVID times: from downloading Aarogya Setu face masks to screens on board, careful monitoring of boarding and disembarkation with curbs on baggages, no food or reading material onboard, transport to and from the airport only in personal or authorized vehicles, thermal screening near the entry gate and web check-in. Union Civil Aviation Minister HARDEEP SINGH PURI spoke to RTI USARIN. Edited excerpts:

Why was there a delay in the announcement of resumption of domestic air traffic in a phased manner?
The decision to stop domestic and international flights was taken as part of the integrated and holistic approach of the government in response to the COVID exigency. With lockdown, rail transport—bus, railways, and air—was allowed, except for some specific exemptions. Now, as the lockdown is being relaxed, transportation activities are starting. Domestic civil aviation operations will re-commence from Monday, 25 May 2020, in a calibrated manner.

What has been the experience of other countries which have similarly opened limited domestic routes?
Aviation industry, the world over, is one of the worst hit sectors. Experience may vary but most countries are characterised by a significant reduction in demand. Some of the countries have opened up the aviation sector but there has been a mix of low occupancies and even of empty flights. New protocols are being developed to facilitate passenger movement.

What was the response of the ministry/government to some state Chief Ministers who opposed the move?
The government has been in consultation with the states on resumption of public transport services. There have been suggestions from states on domestic travel and their sensitivities, to the extent possible, have been taken into account.

This is the first phase of opening domestic air travel. What can we expect in phase two?
It is an evolving situation. Conditions are changing on daily basis. The sector has to be opened up gradually and in a calibrated manner. We commenced a phased evacuation of Indian nationals, stranded and in distress, abroad. A limited number of flights have been announced. We intend a phased escalation, keeping in view the SOPs. After domestic travel has been eased, we can then, depending on evolving situ-

What problems did the fact that metros like Delhi and Mumbai were red zones and that they have the highest traffic pose in the phased reopening process?
The metros like Delhi and Mumbai are the worst hit due to the pandemic. These are also our major economic centres. They account for highest traffic movement and have been developed as hub for their operations by various airlines. The airlines will have to follow full protocols and operate as per SOPs.

Are the airlines fully on board with the operating protocols?
We have been regularly speaking to the airlines and all other stakeholders. Their views have been sought and considered while formulating the SOPs and protocols.

Who will bear the burden, for example, of leaving vacant seats gives that the airlines are already facing huge financial losses?
We have taken a holistic view of the situation. Experts are of the opinion that even if the middle seat is left vacant, then also social distancing norms may not be followed. Airlines over the world have not gone for this option. They are already facing huge losses. Commercial viability of operations has also been considered. The economics of ticket pricing, in case of a vacant middle seat, would take air travel beyond the reach of general public. However, we have gone for additional safety protocols based on our experience of Mission Vande Bharat. Aviation experts have also opined that the air conditioning system in an aircraft is so designed that the direction of airflow is from ceiling to floor which minimises risks.

What stimulus can the airlines expect from the government?
The government is having discussions with airlines on a regular basis. We already took some steps to mitigate the long pending demands of the airlines and Aviation Sector. In January 2020, fuel throughput charges were rationalised. Central excise duty on aviation turbine fuel (ATF) was reduced from 18 per cent to 5 per cent with full input tax credit from 1 April 2020. The proposal to bring ATF under the ambit of GST before the GST Council, which has representation from the states as well. Further measures will certainly be considered.

 Till now, only 60 per cent of the airspace was available for civil aviation movement. Now, these restrictions are being eased out so that civilian flight operations become more efficient. We are also moving forward on second round of public-private partnership on six additional airports. It is expected that additional investment of around 2000 crores will be made by private players in the 12 airports in the first and second round.

What do you feel is the fate of the aviation industry globally in the COVID and post-COVID scenario?
Aviation is a highly capital intensive business and it has been one of the worst hit globally during the COVID pandemic. Internationally, many Airlines like Virgin Australia, Air Mauritius, just to name a few, have gone into liquidation. We are the third largest domestic aviation market and were in the middle of a massive expansion. We wanted the domestic aviation sector to be the third largest market (post-COVID) in the world. As Hon’ble PM has rightly pointed out, we have to view this crisis as an opportunity. I am of the firm view that the Indian aviation sector will come out stronger in this crisis. In addition to Air India, private players have been participating in lifestyle Udan, flying dedicated cargo planes has been a new experience for many of them.

What is the new normal for the civil aviation industry in India?
Indian civil aviation market is very dynamic. As Hon’ble PM has rightly pointed out, now we have to move further towards self-reliance. We have already taken some steps so that the maintenance repair work is done within the country. As already pointed out, India is one of the biggest civil aviation markets in the world and was going for a massive expansion with one of the biggest order books for acquiring new planes. We still have only 8 per cent penetration and this is a huge opportunity for the manufacturing and the service industry. We are very confident that Indian aviation will come out stronger from this crisis.