



BRIEFING

Resuming non-scheduled commercial flights from India

Date:	19 January 2021	Priority:	Medium
Security classification:		Tracking number:	2021-1944

Action sought		
	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Chris Hipkins Minister for Covid-19 Response	<p>Note MIQ, in coordination with Immigration New Zealand, MFAT and MoT, intends to facilitate the resumption of non-scheduled commercial flights from India to New Zealand.</p> <p>Note MIQ will manually allocate up to 150 MIAS vouchers per fortnight for travellers on the initial non-scheduled commercial flights, commencing in April.</p>	26 January 2021
Hon Kris Faafoi Minister of Immigration	For information	N/A

Contact for telephone discussion (if required)				
Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact	
Stacey Munro-Flynn	General Manager, Engagement and Service Design	Privacy of natural persons		
Privacy of natural persons	Policy Director, MIQ Policy			✓
	Policy Advisor			

The following departments/agencies have been consulted
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), Ministry of Transport (MoT), Ministry of Health (MoH), Immigration New Zealand (INZ)

Minister's office to complete:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Declined |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Noted | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seen | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by Events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's Notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn |

Comments



BRIEFING

Resuming non-scheduled commercial flights from India

Date:	19 January 2021	Priority:	Medium
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Purpose

This paper informs you of border agencies' intention to resume non-scheduled commercial flights from India, and sets out MIQ's role in the proposed approach and risk mitigation measures.

Recommended action

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment recommends that you:

- a **Note** MIQ, in coordination with Immigration New Zealand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Ministry of Transport, intends to facilitate the resumption of non-scheduled commercial flights from India. *Noted*
- b Legal and professional privilege *Noted*
- c **Note** a limited availability of MIAS vouchers online for the non-scheduled flight dates could reduce the commercial viability of running these flights for airlines and result in cancellations. *Noted*
- d **Note** MIQ will manually allocate up to 150 MIAS vouchers per fortnight, for up to 3 months initially to assess demand, for travellers on non-scheduled commercial flights, in order to increase the likelihood that New Zealand citizens will secure a voucher and reduce the likelihood of flight cancellations. *Noted*
- e **Note** while airlines decide when to operate the flights, the final authorisation sits with the Ministry of Transport. *Noted*
- f **Note** we have attached suggested talking points at **Annex One**, should you wish to inform your colleagues of this proposal at Cabinet on 26 January. *Noted*

Stacey Munro-Flynn
General Manager, Engagement and Service Design
Managed Isolation and Quarantine Unit, MBIE

19 / 1 / 2021

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for Covid-19 Response

23 / 1 / 2021

Background

1. Due to COVID-19, the Indian government implemented a halt on inbound and outbound international commercial flights on 19 March 2020. With the new strand of COVID-19 emerging from the UK, this halt is likely to be extended. In addition, Singapore has been closed off as a transit option for travel from India to New Zealand.
2. As a result, there are very limited options for people legally entitled to travel from India to New Zealand to do so. While there are some exceptions for Indian passport holders (who can travel to Dubai via an air bubble arrangement, and then on to New Zealand), all other travellers rely on very limited non-scheduled commercial flights to provide a viable route to New Zealand.
3. Before the Managed Isolation Allocation System (MIAS) went live, 17 government and privately-arranged non-scheduled flights arrived from India, carrying a total of approximately 3,600 travellers. However, no further flights were approved once MIAS vouchers became mandatory on 3 November and places in MIQ became difficult to secure. As a result, no flights from India have arrived in New Zealand since 31 October.

People travelling to New Zealand from India are facing lengthy delays

4. There is a backlog of New Zealand citizens, residence-class visa holders and temporary visa holders with border exceptions who are located in India, and wish to travel to New Zealand. They have now been waiting to travel for several months. During this time, there have been continuous requests from travel agents to authorise non-scheduled flights from India. This was not possible due to a lack of available places in MIQ.

5. Legal and professional privilege

6. National security or defence

It is now an appropriate time to resume non-scheduled commercial flights from India

7. Legal professional privilege

8. This paper sets out operational matters for your information. There will be no change to current border settings or class exceptions.
9. Suggested talking points are attached at **Annex One**, should you wish to inform your colleagues of this proposal at Cabinet on 26 January.

Proposed approach and role of MIQ

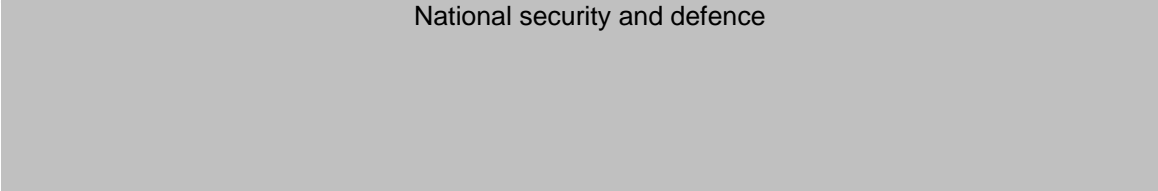

We expect flights will be in high demand, though this is difficult to accurately predict

10. Based on information available to MFAT, we expect there will be ongoing demand from travellers seeking to enter New Zealand on flights from India. As an indicative figure, there are currently 1,014 active registrants on MFAT's Safe Travel system who are based in India. However, actual numbers of New Zealand citizens in India are likely to be higher.
11. Following the flights that arrived from India in 2020, we do not know exactly what level of residual demand for flights to New Zealand remains. MFAT is contacted regularly by people based in India seeking to return to New Zealand, though at a significantly reduced volume than during 2020. The High Commission in New Delhi estimates that there may be demand for around one flight per month, and initial demand may be higher. However, it is difficult to know for certain until flights become available and potential travellers know all relevant costs and timeframes.
12. No government funding will be required to operate these flights, as they will be commercially-operated by airlines and travel agents.
13. Assuming final decisions are made promptly and your colleagues are comfortable with the approach, the first flights will be planned for April this year. This delay is primarily because of space availability in MIQ, but also because airlines require around six weeks of lead-in time after a final decision to authorise a flight.

Operational details to be worked through

14.  Commercial information
15. We expect the first few flights will be arranged fortnightly to accommodate initial high demand, with later flights operating monthly once agencies have had time to assess ongoing levels of demand. Flights will have up to 150 passengers each, who we expect to accommodate in either Christchurch or Auckland MIQ facilities (this is subject to more detailed operational planning in the coming weeks).
16. An additional benefit of facilitating these flights is that travel agents could allow backfilling of Indian citizens who wish to leave New Zealand.

We are confident allowing flights from India will not significantly increase COVID-19 risk at the border

17. The Ministry of Health has provided a public health risk statement for repatriation flights from India. Key points from the assessment are:
 - a.  National security and defence
 - b. 

18. Lessons learned from accommodating previous groups of returnees from India, public health communications, and the added functionality on MIAS will also ensure MIQ is well-equipped to safely manage resuming these flights from India. For example:
- a. We can provide good advance advice to travellers to protect themselves and their families in the 14 days prior to departure such as avoiding crowds, physical distancing, mask use and hand hygiene.
 - b. Advance information can be provided about all travellers to allow for appropriate cultural support, translation, and healthcare provision while people are in MIQ.

19. In addition, international travel is also likely to become safer over time. International relations

International relations

Setting aside rooms on MIAS for the initial flights will reduce the chance of delays for New Zealanders

20. As previously noted [briefing 2021-1728 refers], MIQ officials have temporarily set aside 400 rooms per fortnight to accommodate group arrivals in New Zealand. These rooms are manually allocated for class exceptions (e.g. RSE workers and sports teams) as well as other groups already eligible to enter New Zealand. At this stage, we do not have a clear sense of what large groups will be entering MIQ at the same time as the flights from India.
21. We plan to manually allocate an additional 150 rooms per flight (initially fortnightly) from available capacity on MIAS for the initial 3 months of flights arriving from India. This will reduce the likelihood that New Zealanders face an unreasonable delay to return home.¹ While manually allocating vouchers will slightly reduce the number of vouchers available to the general public on MIAS, we consider this is justified due to the lengthy delay already experienced by New Zealanders in India who have not been able to travel since 31 October 2020.
22. The alternative approach of requiring travellers on the initial flights to source their own MIAS vouchers is unlikely to prove workable, as we expect limited vouchers will be available. If insufficient passengers were able to secure MIAS vouchers for the correct day, the flight would cease to be commercially viable and would be unlikely to go ahead.²

Prioritisation of travellers securing MIAS vouchers

23. Legal professional privilege

¹ 150 rooms may be more than sufficient to accommodate travellers on each flight, in which case vouchers will be released back into MIAS once flight details are confirmed.

² Unlike the majority of scheduled commercial flights, these flights are unlikely to be carrying freight in their holds (which might make a flight commercially viable notwithstanding a small passenger load), although officials will consider the feasibility of using these flights to freight essential medical supplies.

24. International relations

25. The current version of MIAS does not allow us to prioritise New Zealand citizens or residents over other travellers (according to visa status). While MIAS version 2.0 (scheduled for release around March this year) will enable prioritisation according to visa status, this is not likely to be released in time for the first non-scheduled commercial flights arriving from India.
26. Nevertheless, we still consider our proposed approach is necessary to ensure New Zealanders have an avenue to return home within a reasonable timeframe (even if access to MIAS vouchers is not exclusive to New Zealand citizens).

Next steps

27. You may wish to inform your Cabinet colleagues of the approach set out in this paper on 26 January.

Annexes

Annex One: Suggested talking points for Cabinet on 26 January

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Key points

In summary, this section contains Talking Points that were a summation of information being released in this paper. The Talking Points were prepared and offered by MBIE/MIQ, but they do not necessarily represent messages that the Minister for Covid-19 Response accepted or ever used.

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