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Hope Floats for HAL Airport Again

TAILWINDS GATHER BIAL nod for Hosur airport rekindles optimism that HAL airport too could blip on the regional connectivity radar. The Civil Aviation Ministry's aggressive promotion of the regional connectivity scheme (UDAN) is providing some hope for Defence airports in Bengaluru and Bidar to resume operations for small passenger aircraft. The recent "no-objection" from the Bangalore International Airport (BIAL) board to the Hosur airport in Tamil Nadu to operate five flights a week is being seen as a positive step in this direction.

The HAL airport in the city and the Bidar airport have not been able to benefit from the phenomenal growth in the civil aviation sector in recent years because of a clause in the concession agreement the Civil Aviation Ministry has signed with private airport operators. This clause seeks to protect private investors by barring a second airport for commercial flights within a radius of 150 km. The Fairfax Group-controlled BIAL and the GMR Group-controlled Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad have not allowed HAL and Bidar airports, in that order, to host commercial flights.

Industries and infrastructure minister RV Deshpande told ET that he has been pursuing with the Bengaluru and Hyderabad airport operators on the need for regional connectivity at these two airports on certain terms and conditions.

"I have told BIAL to look at HAL airport's case in the same way as Hosur airport. I recently met GMR Group chairman GM Rao and told him to help as the north Karnataka region

badly needs air connectivity in the backdrop of industrial and other activities."

The GMR Group chairman, he said, responded positively and the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport CEO has followed it up with a letter to the Civil Aviation Ministry. The minister said he has also spoken to MoS (Civil Aviation) Jayant Sinha to call a meeting with all airport stakeholders and open the HAL and Bidar airports for regional connectivity.

"As far as HAL airport goes, the ball is in BIAL's court. Both BIAL and HAL have to work together to make things happen. That the BIAL Board granting permission for Hosur airport is a good sign and it may pave way for similar treatment for HAL airport too," said DV Prasad, Additional Chief Secretary, Industries Department, and a BIAL board member till recently.

HAL, a company spokesperson said, has recently written to the Civil Aviation Ministry requesting inclusion in the list of airports identified for regional connectivity. According to government officials, non-availability of takeoff and landing slots at Bengaluru and Hyderabad international airports may work in favour of HAL and Bidar airports. These metro airports are unlikely to entertain small aircraft deployed for regional connectivity in peak hours.

At a recent meeting the Karnataka government convened, airline executives told Deshpande that airlines deploy smaller aircraft such as ATRs for regional connectivity and ATRs usually take more time for takeoff



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compared to a large aircraft. Metro airports prefer slotting bigger aircraft to turboprops precisely because of this reason. The turboprops too would need peak-hour slots if regional connectivity scheme has to meet passenger needs, they said.