

Safety first

DGCA is right in grounding Neo planes

The decision by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) last week to ground 11 Airbus A320neo planes fitted with engines made by American aerospace manufacturer Pratt & Whitney after recurring malfunctions should be welcomed as it was taken to secure the safety of fliers. The directive followed in the wake of instances of in-flight engine shutdowns and rejected takeoffs, but the immediate trigger was an emergency landing by an Indigo aircraft with 186 passengers on board. Since then, the number of grounded Neo planes has risen to 15, resulting in cancellation of 600 flights by Indigo and GoAir in March alone on different routes. Unsurprisingly, this has also caused air fares to rise. The grounded planes belong to the Airbus fleet with engines made by Pratt & Whitney, a subsidiary of United Technologies, whose engines are used the world over in civil and military aviation.

The decision to ground aircraft with even one faulty engine has faced criticism, but the DGCA is in the right as no regulator can take a chance on matters relating to safety of air passengers. The move has been termed “unilateral” by the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), which has said only a glitch in both engines should merit grounding of planes. Robert F Ludech, global president of Pratt & Whitney, has also expressed disappointment over the Indian regulator’s action, and has said the fleet will be back in action flying in India by the end of April. The proposed plan of Pratt & Whitney had earlier called for the replacement of faulty engines by June, requiring some planes to fly with one affected engine for almost three more months. However, the DGCA stand was vindicated a day later when two more Indigo Neo planes encountered similar glitches. In one instance, metal chips were detected in the jet’s engine oil at Delhi airport and, in another, a hydraulic leakage was spotted in a plane at Srinagar airport. The one with metal chips in engine oil has been grounded.

This is not the first time that A320 planes have been grounded. The government had grounded all 14 A320 aircraft flown by Indian Airlines in 1990 after the crash of an Airbus plane that resulted in the death of 97 persons. The airline’s chairman, R Prasad, resigned after the crash, accepting moral responsibility. The grounding had disrupted air travel in the country, with no private airlines flying in India at that time.

The question, however, is whether the DGCA should have acted much earlier, when the first signs of malfunctioning in the Pratt & Whitney engines became evident. Though fire-related cases were reported on a Mumbai-Delhi Indigo flight and a Delhi-Bengaluru GoAir flight last year, Pratt & Whitney ruled out any safety issue. On its part, the DGCA conducted borescope inspections on engines with 1,000 flight hours, a reduction from the 1,500 hours recommended by the engine manufacturer. But there was no grounding at that time. It is thus obvious that the regulator as well as the individual airlines need to be more vigilant and responsible in future.