

Indians may consider visiting Iraq barring 5 terror-hit provinces: MEA

SHUBHAJIT ROY

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 5

ALMOST FOUR-AND-A-HALF years after New Delhi cautioned Indians against travelling to Iraq, the NDA government Tuesday revised its travel advisory and said that Indians may now consider travelling to Iraq but avoid five terror-affected provinces.

This comes almost a year-and-a-half after the ISIS was defeated and less than 11 months after the government confirmed the death of 39 Indians, who were killed in captivity by the terror outfit.

Issued by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Tuesday, the updated advisory said that "due to the improvement in the security situation", Indians may now consider travelling to the country except to

five provinces which are still affected by terrorism and violence. "With improvement in security situation in Iraq, Indian nationals may now consider travelling to the country except to the five Provinces of Iraq, namely Nineveh (capital Mosul), Salahuddin (capital Tikrit), Diyala (capital Baquba), Anbar (capital Ramadi) and Kirkuk," the MEA advisory said.

There are 19 provinces in Iraq, popularly known as governorates. And majority of them are considered safe spaces by the UN agencies. "Our mission made a thorough assessment of the security situation before we updated the travel advisory," a source said.

Indians wishing to travel for employment to the safe areas must register on the government's e-migrate portal and inform the Indian Embassy in

Baghdad or the Consulate General of India in Erbil prior to travelling, the advisory said.

Before the Gulf war in 1991, there were more than 80,000 Indian nationals in Iraq. Most of them left Iraq before the war.

After the 2003 invasion, thousands of Indian workers were recruited by contractors to provide various services to foreign military bases in Iraq. Many of them left with the deteriorating security situation in the country.

With the lifting of the government advisory against Indians travelling to Iraq which was in vogue from 2004 till May 2010, the number of Indian workers had steadily increased in the more stable Kurdistan region comprising Erbil, Sulaimaniya and Dohuk governorates, with better salaries and working conditions in steel mills,

oil companies and construction projects.

When the ISIS took over large parts of Iraq in 2014, the Indian government evacuated thousands of Indian nationals from Iraq. India had also issued at least three travel advisories in June 2014, asking people to avoid Iraq.

At present, the total number of Indians in Iraq is now estimated to be around 10,000-12,000, mostly in Kurdistan region, Basra, Najaf and Karbala. About 30,000-40,000 Indians visit Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf and Samarra in Iraq for pilgrimage annually.

"Iraq now needs skilled and semi-skilled Indian workers to rebuild and re-construct the war-ravaged country. This advisory will give confidence to people interested in working in the country," a source said.