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N.J. Schools, Colleges Can Conduct In-person Graduations After July 6

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Over 300 Indian citizens who were stuck in the U.S. due to global travel restrictions flew on a special Air India flight under the Vande Bharat Mission from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport to Bengaluru, on May 25. The second phase of non-scheduled commercial flights of Air India from the US to various cities in India is underway from May 19 to May 29.

In the first phase, Air India operated non-scheduled commercial flights from the U.S. to various Indian cities from May 9 to May 15.

Under the second phase, two flights will fly from New York to Delhi, Chandigarh and Bengaluru; two from San Francisco to Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Kochi and Ahmedabad; one from Washington to Bengaluru

and Ahmedabad and two from Chicago to Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Ahmedabad and Hyderabad.

India's Consul General in New York Sandeep Chakravorty and Deputy Consul General Shatrughna Sinha were at the airport to supervise the process.

Chakravorty called the initiative "a pan India" mission and said the Vande Bharat Mission to repatriate Indians stranded abroad is "historic."

Accompanying Consul General Chakravorty and Deputy Consul General Sinha were prominent members of the Indian American community, including FIA President Anil Bansal and immediate past president Alok Kumar, who accorded a warm welcome to the Air India crew.

On behalf of the FIA, Bansal welcomed the

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crew to New York for the second phase of the Vande Bharat Mission. He lauded Air India and its crew for showing “great courage in flying during this time and bring our brothers and sisters home to be with their loved ones.” Bansal recognized Air India’s country head, Kamal Raul and his team “for organizing evacuation flights” from JFK New York, Newark, New Jersey, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco. “Many Air India staff members here have to work very long hours to get the formalities completed after getting the list of approved passengers on a flight from the Embassy of India,” he said. He also thanked Prem Bhandari, president, Jaipur Foot USA, who was instrumental in organizing this reception in honor of our Air India crew members. “We are truly proud of Modi’s government and the Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Singh Puri and our Consul General Sandeep Chakravorty for their leadership in taking care of their citizens,” Bansal said.

The Government of India launched the Vande Bharat Mission on May 7 to bring back Indians stranded in various countries due to coronavirus-related restrictions. Under Phase I of the mission, the government evacuated a total of 6,527 Indians from the Gulf region, as well as from the U.S., the UK, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Malaysia and the Maldives.





Visa and Travel Restrictions for OCI Card Holders Eased

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has relaxed visa and travel restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, permitting certain categories of Overseas Citizen Of India (OCI) cardholders, who are stranded abroad, to come to India. The OCI holders, however, will be subjected to certain categories.

According to the MHA press release, the relaxation will be allowed to only certain categories of OCI cardholders, which includes minors, students, OCI spouses of Indian nationals, and those required to travel for emergencies.

The individuals were be permitted to fly only after getting clearance to fly after compiling with airline safety and precautions. The announcement comes as a big relief to all those stranded in the U.S.

The first steps toward easing the visa travel restrictions were made by India's Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan, in a May 17 virtual panel discussion with Indian-Americans on COVID-19, organized jointly by the Federation of Indian Associations (FIA) and the Bihar Jharkhand Association of North America (BAJNA).

All international flights were suspended on March 24, a day before the nationwide lockdown was announced. OCI cardholders were also not permitted to travel to India even for emergencies, even after the Government of India began evacuation exercise for Indians stranded within the country, due to temporary suspension of the visa. "This is step-motherly treatment with people of Indian origin and against the very ethos and spirit behind it," said Prem Bhandari, chairman, Jaipur Foot USA.

Responding to a query on the same, Muraleedharan noted that India, top leadership, is personally aware of the challenges faced by the OCI cardholders. "I understand the agony of the OCI cardholders. Please do not have any ill will," he said.

Muraleedharan urged the diaspora to invest in India given the opportunity to be offered by the major economic reforms announced by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. "Perhaps, India has never had such an economic reform. This is a great opportunity for the Indian diaspora to come and invest in India," he said.



N.J. Schools, Colleges Can Conduct In-person Graduations After July 6

There is finally good news for those graduating this year in New Jersey. There is a strong chance they might get to have their graduation ceremonies this year after all, with Gov. Phil Murphy announcing that he will relax his stay-at-home order to allow in-person, outdoor graduation ceremonies starting July 6. Murphy's long-awaited decision, which applies to middle schools, high schools and colleges, was well received by some teens who hope their final year in high school can end in a traditional cap-and-gown commencement, despite the coronavirus outbreak that has upended their daily lives since March. The COVID-19 pandemic stripped this year's high school seniors of potential lifelong memories. They had to forgo senior trips, proms and other events, but they are glad that a chance for graduations is on the horizon.

However, it is clear that this year's graduation will be totally different. Murphy said that for some schools with large graduating classes, adhering to social distancing may lead to multiple ceremonies "to be held across different times and even different days." "Our goal is to ensure that our students are given the send-offs they richly deserve and which they have been working toward. We want them to celebrate and to be celebrated by their families, friends and the educators who help get them there," Murphy said. He added he is "confident that no one will ever forget the way we will celebrate the Class of 2020."

