

Highway dhabas, truck repair shops to be allowed from April 20: MHA

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ht Anisha Dutta
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The transporters have urged the Centre to provide a security coverage of Rs 15,000 per month for workers engaged in the supply chain. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on Wednesday issued fresh guidelines easing the ongoing nationwide lockdown restrictions from April 20 by allowing some sectors such as the opening of shops for truck repairs and eateries along national highways to cater to stranded truckers across states.

Many of these truckers have been stuck across state borders since March 24 – a day before the nationwide lockdown restrictions were enforced and has since been extended to May 3 to contain the spread of coronavirus disease (Covid-19) outbreak.

The MHA guidelines have specified that the movement of all trucks and other goods vehicles with two drivers and one helper will be allowed on condition that the driver is carrying a valid driving licence and empty truck/vehicle will be allowed to ply after the delivery or pick-up of goods.

The All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), an apex body of transporters, have reached out to the government, seeking an economic package for the sector in a bid to bring back migrant labourers, as most of them have gone back to their native places because of the lockdown woes, and resolve supply chain hurdles.

They have also sought clarity from the government on the opening of booking offices and warehouses for loading and unloading of goods. “We welcome the fresh guidelines, as allowing the movement of all goods carriers will ease some pressure on the sector, especially for those whose vehicles loaded with non-essential goods are stranded. But there’re still many challenges. For example, there’s no clarity about the opening of booking offices, factories and warehouses and unless they are resolved, it’d be difficult to unload and book goods,” Kultaran Singh Atwal, president, AIMTC, said.

“The non-availability of finance is another big challenge for the road transport sector, where more than 20 crore people are directly or indirectly involved. This sector is one of the worst affected because of the lockdown restrictions, as over 90% of the vehicles have been lying idle. The government needs to give immediate stimulus to this sector to drive up the economy,” he added.

The transporters have urged the Centre to provide a security coverage of Rs 15,000 per month for workers engaged in the supply chain. They have also sought soft loans at a lower rate of interest, at par with the international level, in a bid to avoid scarcity of working capital finance.

“The next two quarters will be critical amid the prevailing uncertainty, as poor consumption will lead to weak demand and leading to less transportation activity. It’ll take at least six months to revive production and consumption and get transportation activity to pick up. Social security for the people engaged in the supply chain has been a long-pending demand. The government must provide for drivers, helpers, loaders, unloaders, and others involved in the supply chain,” Singh said.

The Centre is also considering providing a Rs 50 lakh insurance coverage for each of the people engaged in the supply chain. “A decision on the demand for insurance coverage will be taken soon,” a senior government official said, requesting anonymity.

The fresh government order mentions strong containment measures in districts that have emerged as Covid-19 hotspots, which has caused fresh concern for the transporters. “For example, a Red Zone, which has reported over 15 Covid-19 positive cases, may lie between two Green Zones, where no cases have been reported so far. This will affect the mobility of goods and staff between the zones,” Singh said.

Thousands of trucks are stranded across several states, since the nationwide lockdown announcement was made on March 24.

The government has issued several advisories to state chief secretaries that movement of both essential and non-essential goods be allowed in a bid to avoid shortage of essential commodities.

Data showed that weak economic activity has reduced the demand in the road transport sector, which has led to an inactive fleet of vehicles adding collateral pressure on the operators

The daily average movement of trucks and distance covered dropped to 20% amid the lockdown, according to LocoNav, a fleet management firm. “We’re hopeful of a marginal recovery, thanks to the MHA’s fresh guidelines on Wednesday. The supply movement is likely to pick up to 40% from April 20, depending on the availability of staff, drivers and labourers, as many have left for their native places,” said Shridhar Gupta , co-founder, LocoNav.

“The MHA guidelines have given us the clarity that a regulatory framework is in place. But, getting the labourers back to work is the biggest worry for now. Production won’t start before May and we need to assess the risk factor in labourers’ minds. They thought that it was safer to go back home when the lockdown was announced. One doesn’t know for sure whether their risk perception has changed, as the government looks to partially ease lockdown restriction curbs,” said Anjani Mandal, chief executive officer, Fortigo Network Logistics.