RailTel- Keeping the Network Running during the COVID19 Crisis

The wave of COVID19 pandemic has hit hard and to tackle this disease, the whole country has gone in an unprecedented lockdown to maintain social distancing. However, owing to the nature of work, RailTel, a Miniratna PSU under Ministry of Railways, had to adapt some crucial steps to continue to provide essential service of Telcom infrastructure, Railway communication and home broadband to its client.

RailTel Corporation a "Mini Ratna (Category-I)" PSU is one of the largest neutral telecom services providers in the country owning a Pan-India optic fiber network covering all important towns & cities of the country and several rural areas.

RailTel handles crucial communication system, video conferencing and implementation of e-office platform as well storing important data for Indian Railways in its two data centres (Gurgaon and Secunderabad). In the current crisis situation, ensuring the availability of essential commodities and associated supply chain is of paramount importance for which Railway freight operations need to be run operated without any hiccups. In such a scenario it is all the more important for keeping the network and data centre operations stable so that it doesn't hamper the Railway freight movement and communication between all the offices of Indian railways across the country. A large number of Banks are also dependent on RailTel services for their data communications needs.

To run the two data centres and 4 Regional Network Operation Centres and One Central Network Operation Centre, RailTel management has deployed minimal physical workforce of 2-3 employees for whom rosters has been prepared and duties are being set on rotation basis. Special arrangements for Boarding and Lodging have been made either at RailTel premises or at a nearby residential areas close to RailTel offices so that the employees do not need to travel over long distances or use mass transport. Majority of the maintenance work has been shifted to various internal Network monitoring platform and tools of RailTel and being monitored remotely. Only, skeletal workforce has been deployed on the ground for essential physical maintenance and for exigencies. All the operational centres are being thoroughly sanitized and disinfected and deputed employees are also maintaining all essential personal hygiene so that no contamination happens. The employee while carrying out work are following social distancing at Data Centre, Network Operation Centres and in field. Permissions from local authorities have also been obtained for employees of our partners and support agencies to ensure no disruptions to services.

RailTel was already implementing e-office platform for Indian Railways for enabling paperless office system. Currently 76198 users are enabled to work from home using this platform. The work of e-office implementation has not been hampered by lockdown and 3608 users were registered after lockdown period. Despite resource movement restrictions, RailTel team planned the execution and implementation and user training was done remotely. NIC c-office has been proved to be boon in the crisis time like this and part of Railway workforce now can work from home as well which would have been impossible in case of manual filing system.

RailTel has also created Virtual Private Network for 400 users of Indian Railways and based on further request the service will be provided. We also upgraded Railnet speed at a number of Railway colonies to further support work from home scenario.

With majority of the workforce working remotely, the video conferencing service provided by RailTel to Indian Railways has also proved to be very effective. The number of video meetings has almost doubled during lockdown period for effectively coordinating the freight train operation on war footing.

All the video conferencing service is being supported by RailTel's TPaaS NOC at Secunderabad which is now being supported by 4 team members on ground and rest of the team working from home. Now a days we have video conferencing of Railway officials happening throughout the day and even late at night which is unprecedented. To handle the same, one official has been deployed in the night shift to make the video conferencing service is available 24X7. Not only that, to facilitate meetings from home, video conferencing facilities has been installed in the residence of 15 General Managers and head of 5 Production units of Railways for Meeting with Hon'ble Minister of Railways, Hon'ble Minister of State for Railways and Chairman Railway Board. This service is also being used for coordination between GMs and DRMs and other officers who are participating through either Telepresence or WebEx from their residence. RailTel installed equipments for attending video conference from residence in a very short notice during lockdown which was a challenge in itself.

Managing the field work and maintaining a vast network of 55000+ RKM fibre during countrywide lockdown has been very challenging. In many cases field staff are facing difficulties due movement restriction, multiple checks on road, non-availability of means of transport, closure of establishments where are equipment's are housed giving feed to upstream services are to name a few. But RailTel teams are working 24X7 to handle any kind of fault so that the network is in best of health. Also, RailTel is taking every possible measure to ensure safety of its workforce on ground as well. The team is highly motivated to continue to serve the nation in its crisis of epic proportions.

Even before the country went under lockdown, RailTel, following Govt advisory, prepared roster of employees to start working with skeletal workforce on ground and rest from home. Cleanliness and hygiene were always a mandate at RailTel offices but with spread of COVID19, extra measures like cleaning and disinfecting surfaces a number of times during the day, sanitizers at office premises, temperature check at the entrance for all employees and visitor became a practice at RailTel offices. RailTel had already adapted NIC e-office and majority of it's file work were being done in digital platform, so when Work from Home became the need of the hour, RailTel was ready for it and the transition was swift and smooth. All employees were given access to RailTel's Virtual Private Network through which they can use E-office, ERP, Intranet platforms remotely so that regular work is not hampered.

Apart from taking all precautions and keeping all the essential functions running, to support the noble cause of fighting the COVID 19 pandemic in India, RailTel has contributed Rs 12 Crores to the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situation fund (PM- CARES fund) from the CSR fund for FY19-20 of RailTel. In addition, contribution of Rs 15.5 lakh which is the voluntary contribution of one day's salary of RailTel employees to fight this deadly disease has also been made.

Team RailTel stand in solidarity with its countrymen in this fight and pledges to implement all precautionary measure to stop the spread of COVID 19.