

Air Astra eyes interline agreement with foreign carriers by year end

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Dhaka : Partnership between airlines is crucial to offer passengers more flight options and services. Hence, the latest local entrant to the country's aviation industry Air Astra is eyeing to ink interline agreements with one or two major foreign airlines by 2024 end.

Imran Asif, CEO of Air Astra, said this while talking to The Bangladesh Monitor at his office in the capital.

The fact that Air Astra is the youngest Bangladeshi airline to receive the IATA Operational Safety Audit (IOSA) certification (in 20 months since inception) helps greatly in this regard, as international airlines prioritise safety standards while inking interline agreements, informed Imran.

Already, Air Astra is in talks with Emirates, Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, Malaysia Airlines and Turkish Airlines, among others, for

interline partnership. These airlines, operating in Bangladesh, usually have passengers that need to travel to and from other parts of the country beyond the capital Dhaka.

Air Astra will consider code-sharing options later, once it begins international operations, expressed Imran.

Speaking of which, the airline earlier had plans to launch international flight operations by this year end.

However, due to less availability of narrowbody aircraft in the global market, ongoing banking sector reform and poor foreign currency reserve in Bangladesh, there had been delays in the purchase process of new aircraft, informed Imran.

He mentioned, once these circumstances develop, the airline will be bringing a number of narrowbody ATR 72-600 aircraft to initially launch short-haul flights to Nepal and India.

The airline currently has a fleet of four ATR 72-600s, with aims to have an all-ATR fleet of 6-8 aircraft soon.

Afterwards, Air Astra eyes to induct other narrowbodies like B737s or A320s to launch flights to East Asia, Southeast Asia and Middle East, claimed Imran.

According to the airline's CEO, Bangladesh's aviation industry will develop proportionately with the growth of the country's economy. Hence, with time, the sector's capacity will only increase with demand.

However, there are certain issues in the practices of the country's sector, sighed Imran.

While other countries develop infrastructure prior, foreseeing growing demand later, Bangladesh witnesses demand first and then prepare infrastructure accordingly to cater, he shared.

This also comes in the way of the airlines expanding their operations with more aircraft and flight services, he also claimed.

Another crisis in the aviation industry currently is pilot shortage, mentioned Imran, since a small aircraft requires 4-5 crew sets including pilot and first officer while a large aircraft needs 7-8 crew sets.

Even though expatriate pilots can be an alternative, it is a very expensive one, claimed Imran.

Also, there are regulations that prevent local airlines from keeping expatriate pilots in service for more than a year, whereas it takes at least three years of flying for a first officer to become a pilot, stressed the airline's CEO.

Since the mass uprising and student protests beginning mid-July, there had been a slump in air travel demand. Nevertheless, the market started recovering from mid-August and by September end, it is expected to reach pre-unrest levels, according to the CEO.