

Milestone plane crash sparks urgent calls for aviation disaster preparedness overhaul

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Dhaka : Bangladesh must radically transform its aviation emergency preparedness system-from unified command structures to urban planning enforcement-if it is to avoid repeating the tragedy of the August 3 Milestone School jet crash.

That was the message of a concept paper presented at the "Aviation Emergencies and Civil Risk: Rethinking Disaster Preparedness in Bangladesh's Airspace" round table conference held at Sheraton Dhaka on August 7.

The paper, prepared by Kazi Wahidul Alam, Editor of the travel trade publication The Bangladesh Monitor, drew its urgency from the harrowing events of August 3, when an F-7 fighter jet crashed into Milestone School and College in Uttara, killing 35 people-most of them children and teachers-and injuring over 50 others.

Presenting the conference's concept paper, Kazi Wahidul Alam described the scene of the crash as "one of the most heart-wrenching aviation tragedies in our country's recent history."

"This was not a combat zone. This was a classroom. A place where children were reciting poems and preparing for the day's lessons - not bracing for a devastating aerial strike," he said.

He recalled how, in the immediate aftermath, "victims, including small children with severe burn injuries, were seen wandering helplessly on the streets" without medical assistance.

Parents were seen carrying burned children on rickshaws and on foot, desperately searching for care.



Kazi Wahidul Alam

It argued that the disaster's aftermath revealed systemic weaknesses: absence of a single command authority with lack of coordination between agencies, delayed ambulance services with only a few commercial ambulances responding, no pre-positioned medical facilities with the capital's only burn hospital located over 20 km away, no rapid evacuation protocol, no field medical center established on-site, and insufficient trained manpower on site.

The report described the response as "fragmented, improvised, and slow-the opposite of what an aviation emergency demands."

"These failings are not just administrative oversights-they are systemic and deeply dangerous," he said, adding that similar incidents could happen again if structural changes are not made.

Key recommendations from paper

1. National Aviation Emergency Taskforce:

- To be formed immediately, comprising Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), Bangladesh Air Force (BAF), Police, Fire Service, Ministry of Health, local government, and civil defence.
- Bound by formal Memoranda of Understanding ensuring obligations are not optional.
- Empowered to lead all emergency responses in and around airports and flight paths.

2. Civil-Military Emergency Protocols (CMEP):

- Detailed joint-operation manuals with predefined roles, authority lines, and communication channels.
- Applicable especially at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, where BAF and civilian flights share the runway.
- Aimed at avoiding jurisdictional disputes during high-pressure emergencies.

3. Preparedness Drills and Capacity Building:

- Quarterly simulation exercises in densely populated areas under flight paths.

- Civil defense units trained in first aid, crowd management, and rescue operations.
- Fire Service to be equipped with advanced aircraft firefighting and rescue gear, with training aligned to ICAO standards.

4. Urban Planning Reforms:

- Immediate demolition of illegal high-rises and structures in protected aviation approach zones.
- Strict prohibition of schools, malls, and large gathering places within designated Safety Risk Zones.
- RAJUK's Detailed Area Plans to integrate aviation safety buffers into zoning law.

5. Medical Infrastructure Near Airports:

- Establish decentralized burn treatment units and trauma centers within 10-15 minutes of major airports.
- Ensure all major hospitals have operational helipads, with air ambulance protocols in place.
- Pre-deploy mobile field hospitals in the event of mass-casualty incidents.

6. The Airport Relocation Debate:

- Pro-relocation camp: Move Dhaka airport to a less congested area, separate military and civilian facilities, build multiple runways with safety buffers.
- Anti-relocation camp: Focus on enforcement of urban planning, believing relocation without urban control would only shift-not solve-risks.

7. Accountability and Public Awareness

- Launch nationwide public drills and awareness campaigns for communities under flight paths.
- Establish clear deadlines, budget allocations, and named officials responsible for implementation.

- Publicly track progress to ensure recommendations do not fade after media attention subsides.

Paper's warning

The concept paper warned that the Milestone disaster was "a forecast of future tragedies" unless preparedness was reimagined.

"Every minute lost in an aviation emergency costs lives. The only acceptable delay is the time it takes to get to the injured-and that must be in minutes, not hours," it said.

"We owe it to those young children - and to every future generation - to ensure their deaths are not in vain," Alam concluded.

Before the conference commenced, all attendees prayed for the departed souls of last year's July uprising as well as of the recent Milestone School crash.

May this unfortunate accident be a wake-up call for the country.

May such incidents never happen again.

Speakers demand unified protocols, urban planning reform, ICAO compliance

The round table conference gathered senior figures from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), Bangladesh Air Force (BAF), national and private airlines, travel trade, urban planning and environment sectors, and the media, aiming to critically assess current systems, identify gaps, and produce actionable recommendations.



Ishfaq Illahi Choudhury

Air Commodore (Retd) Ishfaq Illahi Choudhury, aviation analyst and former Director of Air Defense at Air HQ, questioned how so many high-rises had been approved near Dhaka airport's north and south sides: "They shouldn't be there. Strict implementation and enforcement of the law is required." He recalled a shelved plan to relocate the airport to Arial Beel 15-16 years ago and warned that the newly built Third Terminal will attract more airlines, increasing airspace pressure: "We need to relocate the airport away from the city."



Kamrul Islam

Group Captain Kamrul Islam, Director of CW and IT, Bangladesh Air Force, said the BAF operates a 24-hour search-and-rescue (SAR) unit for civilian emergencies, with helicopters also deployed for maritime rescues. "The SAR team was active during the Milestone crash incident. But dense traffic and crowding at the site delayed rescue efforts. We must eradicate such congestions for better disaster preparedness."



AKM Ziaul Huq

Air Commodore AKM Ziaul Huq, former Member of Air Traffic Management at CAAB, said a committee for emergencies already exists within CAAB but needs stronger cooperation: "We should sign MoUs with all stakeholders-BAF, Police, Fire Service, Health-so everyone works together in disaster recovery." He urged more frequent joint drills (every two years at present) and more emergency medical and burn units near airports. He stressed RAJUK's responsibility for illegal high-rises, saying: "CAAB informs RAJUK, but enforcement is up to them."



Tanvir Khurshid

Captain Tanvir Khurshid, Chief of Technical at Biman Bangladesh Airlines, pointed to the inefficiencies of joint military-commercial airport use: "On national occasions, air force displays delay commercial flights. Sometimes we can't take extra fuel due to time limits. Abroad, civil and military aviation often operate from different airports. Here, mid-air collisions are a real risk."



Iqbal Habib

Architect Iqbal Habib, Co-founder of VITTI Sthapati Brindo Ltd and environmental activist, criticized the Civil Aviation Act for ignoring public health: "It says nothing on sound pollution or vibration effects. Unsafe building heights have been permitted on flight paths. Why are there schools and malls there at all?" He called for coordinated action between RAJUK, public works, city corporations, and local governments, and urged: implementation of the existing Urban Resilient Plan, civil defense teams with regular drills, and more than the current six trauma centers nationwide.



Shafiqul Islam

Air Commodore (Retd) Shafiqul Islam, former Assistant Chief of Air Staff, said the real issue was poor urban planning: "Moving the airport will not solve the problem. As the city grows, it will expand around any new location. Should we keep moving forever?"



Mofizur Rahman

Group Captain (Retd) Mofizur Rahman, MD of NOVOAIR, took the opposite stance: "The airport was once outside the city. We have grown around it. We must relocate. Hospitals should allow helicopter landings for rescues. Current helicopter flight policies are too restrictive."



Salahuddin M Rahmatullah

Captain (Retd) Salahuddin M Rahmatullah, former head of the Aircraft Accident Investigation Committee, called for: a national disaster preparedness program, relocation of schools from airport zones, an independent runway for the air force, and greater public awareness.



Imran Asif

Imran Asif, CEO of Air Astra, criticized poor adherence to CAAB airport-area regulations and ICAO guidance, saying Bangladesh is not compliant.



ATM Nazrul Islam

Wing Commander (Retd) ATM Nazrul Islam, advisor at Aviet-Hansa Aviation Ltd, warned: "There is no buffer zone near the airport. We are not prepared for off-airport disasters. There was no command or field hospital at the crash site. As per ICAO, no gatherings should occur under aircraft approach paths, yet we ignore this." He said Dhaka airport would be unfit for commercial aviation after 2035, urging a new facility with separate military and civil runways.



Md Sohel Rana

Col (Retd) Md Sohel Rana, ex-Chief Flying Instructor of Army Aviation, pressed for modernization of the Bangladesh Air Force fleet.



Tanzim Anwar

Tanzim Anwar, President of the Aviation and Tourism Journalists Forum of Bangladesh, revealed: "There are 525 illegal structures near the airport, with 158 cases pending. RAJUK does nothing. CAAB doesn't enforce. This is a coordination failure."



Shamsuzzahan

Captain Shamsuzzahan, Head of Safety Management at US-Bangla Airlines, highlighted air safety threats from high-rises near Jashore airport and trees obstructing Cox's Bazar flight paths: "The Environment or Forest Department won't let CAAB cut the trees. Coordination among agencies is lacking. Dhaka needs a second runway. Moving the airport further away will increase costs."



Ahmed Reza

Ahmed Reza, Country Manager of Cathay Pacific, said: "Inter-department coordination is zero in Bangladesh. There is no accountability. Foreign airlines follow strict safety compliance. The authorities should consult us-we are ready to support."



Shakawath Hossain, CEO of Unique Hotels and Resorts, concluded that Bangladesh's disaster management "is poor," calling for better firefighter training, relocation of Dhaka airport with multiple runways, and strict bans on public gatherings near flight paths.



Sadia Haque

Sadia Haque, Co-Founder and CEO of ShareTrip and rapporteur for the conference, summed up the discussions, noting the urgency for binding timelines and accountability mechanisms. "We have heard strong recommendations today, but unless they are acted upon with clear responsibilities and deadlines, we will be here again after another tragedy," she said. Haque stressed that public awareness must be treated as seriously as technical safety measures: "Preparedness is not only about aircraft and protocols-it's about people knowing what to do when seconds matter." She urged that the conference's outcomes be formally documented and shared with all relevant ministries, regulators, and emergency services, so that "the dialogue translates into tangible, life-saving reforms."

Coordination, enforcement, compliance key to safety

Despite differing views on relocation, speakers unanimously agreed that without unified command, ICAO compliance, and strict urban planning enforcement, Bangladesh will remain dangerously exposed to aviation disasters in civilian zones.

As Alam said in his opening: "Let this round table be the beginning of a new chapter-where skies may roar, but the ground remains safe."