

Passengers grapple with excessive high airfare in post pandemic

A Monitor Report

Date: 16 December, 2021



Dhaka : In this post-pandemic time, travel should be further facilitated and made easier allowing it to rebound after over a year-long hiatus due to the coronavirus. However, the reality is the exact opposite. Airfares to international destinations, mostly Middle East, have reached record sky-high, compared to pre-pandemic times. The vast increase in airfare is making passengers suffer during their essential travel while tourists are fearing to visit the destinations to fulfil their travel thirst suppressed for so long.

However, the most affected are the migrant workers flying to Middle East destinations. It feels like they are unreasonably being robbed off their hard earned money as airlines are now charging exorbitant fares for flights.

Many struggling expatriate workers cannot afford such unfair prices. And thus, many migrant labours are failing to fly while their work visas expire, as they cannot find a ticket to their respective destination at a fair price.

For instance, the cost of a flight to Saudi Arabia has more than doubled now to BDT 90,000. Agencies claim ticket prices for all routes to the Middle East have risen and almost all airlines are charging more.

As the world recovers from the coronavirus crisis, Middle Eastern countries are once again recruiting workers. This has led to a surge in demand for air tickets and

the fares are unfairly coinciding with it.

Monsur Ahmed Kalam, President of Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh, claimed the airlines are capitalising on the high demand for tickets.

"The original price of a ticket is BDT 40,000. They [airlines] will sell as many as available and once the tickets run out, they can just say it is sold out. But now, they are saying tickets are available but will cost BDT 80,000. They are grabbing money at gunpoint."

According to an online travel agency Flight Expert, an economy class seat on Saudi Arabian Airlines to Jeddah from Dhaka_ an eight-hour flight_ on Dec 28 will cost BDT 88,048. Comparatively, a passenger can travel to New York, which is more than twice the distance, on an Emirates Airlines flight the same day by spending BDT 62,622.

State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali expressed regret about the high airfares as migrants struggle with the risk of being priced out of work overseas.

"We don't want Bangladeshi migrants to buy tickets at higher prices. We spoke to the Managing Director of Biman Bangladesh Airlines about the matter. We also discussed it with other airlines and tried to bring the prices down reasonably."

However, interestingly, Bangladesh is the only country in the region to be affected by such a hike in air ticket prices in post-pandemic times, said immigration experts. They advised the government and state-owned airlines to arrange extra flights for workers at special prices to overcome the crisis.

Imran Ahmad, Minister for Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, sent a letter to the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism urging them to take measures to lower airfares immediately.

On top of it, travel agents claim a similar crisis is starting to play out for flights to other regions as well, to Europe and America via the Middle East.

While the Bangladeshi expatriates are having to pay for additional expenses related to Covid tests and quarantine, the high airfare further adds to their woes.

However, ticket prices in neighbouring countries, including India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, remain unchanged. For instance, Air Arabia flights to Jeddah are Rs 31,900 from Delhi, while flights from Assam on SpiceJet and Air Arabia services cost Rs 42,000.

Shariful Hasan, Head of Migration Programme, BRAC, said "Our airlines can actually offer tickets at special prices for overseas workers. The special rates can be issued against the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training cards."

"As many as 7.5 million of Bangladesh's 10 million overseas workers are stationed in the Middle East. The expatriates' welfare ministry and airlines can make a special arrangement together."

The ATAB President mentioned around 5,000 regular travellers need tickets to the Middle East each day. But there are 3,500 available seats in all airlines combined. The remaining 1,500 face crisis every day.

He requested the authorities to find a way out of the issue, he said, "They have to arrange more flights to carry all passengers."