

## Recovering aviation sector hits snag again, govt under heavy fire

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Dhaka : Since the country went into another strict lockdown, Civil Aviation Authority suspended all international flight operations to and from Bangladesh as well as domestic flights for a week from April 14, apart from chartered flights, cargo flights, air ambulance and special flights. But the government is now under heavy fire for shutting down air services. The decision has been termed as "injudicious" by many and demanded its immediate withdrawal for the greater interest of the country.

The local aviation industry as well as airline service seekers have strongly criticised CAAB's decision and described it as highly injudicious. About 500 international flights to and from Bangladesh have been affected by this. They think that this unnecessary total ban has no parallel in the world and is going to harm the interest of the country.

Since the government only suspended public transport on the roads while allowing private transport to continue as well as garments and other industries to run amid the strict lockdown, there is no point in halting flight operations with the baseless excuse of "passengers cannot reach airports in the country due to unavailability of transport services". The passengers can surely manage private transport services on their own to reach their respective airports to catch their flights.

Also, incoming travellers were not posing a risk in regards to the spread of the coronavirus in the first place, because all were having to quarantine for 14 days anyway. And stopping outbound travel from the country in the name of curbing the virus spread does not sound sensible as outbound passengers would depart the country and leave for a foreign destination posing no risk for Bangladesh.

On this note, a spokesperson for the largest private carrier of the country US-Bangla, said, "Last year we suffered a lot. Although we were gradually recovering by the end of the same year, the new lockdown changes all that."

"There are airport parking charges, airport office fees, and staff costs to be taken into consideration. There is a steep cost for aircraft maintenance if they remain idle. Also, we are still not fully operational internationally," he sighed.

An official of NOVOAIR said, "If the lockdown and imposed restriction on aviation gets lengthier, the industry will suffer a lot. Due to the pandemic, we are yet to recover."

"Aviation is not comparable with any other sector. Owing to Covid-19, it is now under threat. We have to fight to get out of this situation. That is very difficult. Not only Biman Bangladesh Airlines, but other private airlines are also facing a crisis," said an industry official seeking anonymity.

Biman will get a subsidy from the government. But in order to save the private airlines, the government should extend a helping hand now by planning with concerned authorities, he added.

In the first nine months of 2020, the sector has lost over BDT 2,500 crore. The longer the pandemic period, the heavier the scale of these losses will be.

The aviation sector, severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, saw a dramatic recovery in the domestic market as passenger volume crossed that in the pre-pandemic period in February.

But, the resurgence of the virus from mid-March weighed on the air travel recovery as the dangerous turn of infections forced the government to suspend domestic flight operations due to the lockdown.

Though confidence grew among air travellers gradually, further tightening of the restrictions on people's movement to contain the spread of the virus weakened that confidence, said industry stakeholders.

The recent recovery data shows that the number of daily air travellers reached 8,362 in February, which was 17.22 per cent higher than the pre-pandemic level of 7,133 in December 2019, according to data from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

However, the number of daily flights was still low compared to the pre-pandemic level.

In February, 132 flights were operated on domestic routes daily on average while the figure was 137 in December 2019.

The number of total domestic air travellers was 2,34,142 in February this year, which was 6 per cent higher than 2,21,123 in December 2019.

The local aviation industry was in a good shape towards recovery as the number of air travellers reached the pre-pandemic level, said a spokesperson for NOVOAIR.

He said air operators were expanding routes and flight frequency to meet the rising demand. But, the resurgence of the virus and flight suspensions have halted the recovery.

As the aviation sector is the most-affected one by the pandemic, the government should consider keeping air travel out of suspension as air operators are maintaining all health safety measures, he added.

In addition to aviation and airline industries, expatriate workers-the big foreign

exchange earners for the country-is going to be losers as well.

Bangladesh exports plenty of manpower to Middle Eastern countries who in return send millions of remittance back to the country, contributing greatly to its economy.

Thus, the way government has prioritised the garments sector and other industries and allowed them to run even amid the strict lockdown, same was expected for civil aviation as the movement of the labour market has now been halted.

This might lead to Bangladesh having a bad reputation in the global stage. The workers might lose their jobs and countries might look elsewhere for recruiting labour - this poses a significant risk to Bangladesh's economy as we could lose a sector that used to earn millions every year.

The Middle East job market, which was gradually opening for Bangladesh workers, will get a big hit, if ban on air traffic continues. According to a market source thousands of people have booked their air passage and hotel room for quarantine in Qatar and Oman. So cancelling all these would be a great hassle for all parties concerned.

They argued that if minimise spread of COVID-19 pandemic is the reason for CAAB decision, then restriction on incoming air traffic would have been much better option. Departing flights leaving with passengers, can no way be a threat in any form.

Market insiders fear that if total flight ban is implemented than expatriate labour market will collapse, leaving hundreds and thousands of workers in great distress with heavy loss of money.

**Middle East bound 20 thousand workers stuck**

Due to the international flight suspension, about 20 thousand Middle East bound immigrant Bangladeshi labours are now stuck in the country. Hence, Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh and Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh urged the government to arrange special flights amid the lockdown to help the workers reach their respective destinations in the Middle East.

The associations made this call on the government at a press conference held on April 13 in the capital.

ATAB President Mansur Ahmed Kalam, at the event, said, thousands of foreign currency earning Bangladeshi immigrant labours stuck in the country are worrying about their visas getting expired.

HAAB President M Shahadat Hossain Taslim said, even the new labours who have already received work permits are in the risk of having those cancelled.

Later, these workers might not be able to get new visas, due to the resurgence of the coronavirus spread, both the presidents claimed.

Thus, it is vital that the government arranges special flights to send these workers back to their respective destinations in the Middle East immediately, they concluded.