

Allow third carriers to carry Umrah passengers besides Biman, Saudia

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Dhaka : Bangladesh is the first country in the region to be allowed Umrah pilgrimage by Saudi Arabia in 2022 following the coronavirus pandemic that put a halt in it for the last two years. Welcoming how Saudi Arabia prioritises Bangladesh for pilgrimage, which is a key travel market of the country, several thousand Bangladeshi pilgrims are now flying to the holy destinations of Mecca and Medina to perform Umrah.

However, as the pilgrims rejoiced with the reopening of Umrah, two new crisis met them in the way, making it difficult for them to perform the pilgrimage, what instead should have been further facilitated. The first crisis being the lack of airline seats compared to the number of pilgrims waiting to fly; and the other the sky high price of air tickets to Saudi Arabia.

M Shahadat Hossain Taslim, President of Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh (HAAB), said this while talking to The Bangladesh Monitor at his office in the capital recently.

The government of Saud Arabia, this year, has mandated that, apart from the Kingdom's carriers, only Bangladeshi airlines can carry Umrah pilgrims to Saudi Arabia from Dhaka, while third carriers cannot. This has forced the nation's flag bearer Biman Bangladesh Airlines and the Kingdom's counterpart Saudi Arabian

Airlines to be the only two to carry Umrah pilgrims from Dhaka to Jeddah.✖**M Shahadat Hossain Taslim, President, HAAB**

"This restriction has led to a crisis of seats as there are only two airlines operating Umrah flights currently, compared to the high demand of pilgrim passengers. Hence, we are failing to accommodate all Umrah pilgrims on flights," said Taslim, President, HAAB.

On top of it, the soaring price of air tickets to Saudi Arabia, or to any other Middle East destination for that matter, is another great impediment making Umrah pilgrimage impossible for many. This is also a result of the capacity restrictions imposed by the Saudi government, added Taslim.

As a solution, Taslim urged the Saudi government to allow third carriers operating in both countries to carry Umrah and Hajj pilgrims as well as Bangladesh's largest private carrier US-Bangla to operate flights to Jeddah, so they too can contribute to the pilgrim travel market.

"With more airlines operating flights on the route, there will be no seat scarcity, which, in turn, will allow every pilgrim to perform Umrah and Hajj from Bangladesh," said the HAAB President.

"Also, the more airlines operate on the route, the more competitive fares will be. This will allow the pilgrims and agencies to have more room to choose and negotiate prices," he further added.

Since the excessive price hike to Middle Eastern routes from Dhaka, which include Saudi Arabia, is making Umrah pilgrims suffer, the HAAB President, said, "Airlines must act responsibly and stop this unethical business practice. They are international standard organisations which should follow global rules and norms."

He called on the airlines to not play with people's rights, saying, "If Biman Bangladesh Airlines steps forward and reduces its airfare, then others will be forced to do the same."

This year, the government of Saudi Arabia did not provide Bangladesh with any pilgrim quota. Meaning, all those wishing to go and perform Umrah from Bangladesh can. However, due to the aforementioned issues and the after-effects of the coronavirus pandemic, less pilgrims are flying for Umrah pilgrimage from Bangladesh this year compared to pre-pandemic times, mentioned Taslim.

"Already, 20-30 thousand pilgrims from Bangladesh have travelled to Saudi Arabia for Umrah purposes. We have seen 400-500 pilgrims apply a day," he noted.

It may be mentioned here, Saudi Arabia has recently lifted all of its coronavirus induced travel restrictions for fully vaccinated pilgrims of any country. There is no longer any need for quarantine or pre-departure RT-PCR test.

Furthermore, Umrah visa process has been made way easier, explained Taslim. It is now done online from agent to agent. Pilgrims do not need to submit their passports in the Embassy.

An agency puts the pilgrim's passport details on Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry website in the application process and sends the cost amount through an IBAN account online. In a few hours, pilgrims get their Umrah visas.

Even the fingerprint of the pilgrims which has been made mandatory recently for Umrah visa application can be done via an app from the comfort of the pilgrim's home or the office of any Umrah agency.

M Shahadat Hossain Taslim, as the President of HAAB, has been in charge of Hajj and Umrah management in the country since 2017. This is the third consecutive time Taslim has been elected as the President of the association.

Speaking about the developments and changes HAAB brought in Hajj and Umrah management, during his last two terms, Taslim highlighted the following:

HAAB stopped trolleybag business syndicate, replacement and quota business syndicate, ticketing syndicate, removed police clearance requirement for Umrah visa, reopened Hajj Management Information System, launched pre-arrival immigration of pilgrims in Bangladesh etc.

"During the new term, I, on behalf of HAAB, will keep on working with utmost honesty, sincerity and integrity to fine-tune Hajj and Umrah management of the country further. With cooperation from the agencies and the governments of both Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, HAAB will always be in pursuit of making the holy purpose of Hajj and Umrah more hassle-free and convenient to the country's pilgrims," concluded M Shahadat Hossain Taslim, President, HAAB.