

## **Biman goes all out to reconnect BD, Europe with direct air connectivity**

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Dhaka : After nine long years, Biman Bangladesh Airlines-now bolstered with stronger fleet and better strategies-is making an all-out effort to reconnect Bangladesh and Europe with direct air connectivity. The country's flag carrier is gearing up to launch direct flights between Dhaka and Italy's Rome from March 26, 2024.

Biman's first attempt to establish air connectivity on the route dates back to 1981. At that time, the airline used to operate one weekly flight between Dhaka and Rome, with McDonnell Douglas DC-10-30 and Boeing 777-200 in the end. The poor number of frequencies used to leave the airline's crew in Rome underutilised.

In addition, once a while, Biman also operated hopping flights on Rome-Milan/Frankfurt-Dhaka route. A hopping flight is a type of flight that makes multiple stops, either for refueling or for passengers to embark

and disembark, before reaching its final destination. Hence, cost of operating such flights is far higher than direct ones.

On top of it, back then, Biman did not boast such a strong fleet of 21 aircraft as it does now. Altogether, the cost of flight operation on the route turned out to be far too high which led to its suspension in 2015.

Now, in 2024, the national airline has stepped up again with better planning and efficient market research as well as a stronger fleet and a higher number of crew to reestablish its presence in the European market with the resumption of Dhaka-Italy flights on the Independence Day.

Prior to Brexit, London and Manchester in the United Kingdom were the only two European destinations where Biman had its strong presence among Bangladeshi passengers. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union has left Biman with zero footprint in the latter's market.

"Therefore, following proper market analysis, we decided to reestablish Biman's presence in the European market but in a way, more bolstered than before," said Mohammed Salahuddin, Director of Marketing and Sales, Biman Bangladesh Airlines while talking to The Bangladesh Monitor at the airline's head office Balaka Bhaban in the capital.

Biman's vigorous efforts to relaunch the route reflect the airline's determination to make its presence permanent in Europe this time, as it will be commencing direct flights between Dhaka and Rome with three weekly frequencies, operated by state-of-the-art ultramodern Boeing 787 Dreamliner with 247 Economy Class and 24 Business Class seats.



"The cost of operation on the route will be less now compared to Biman's first attempt and both aircraft as well as crew of Biman will be properly utilised this time," added Salahuddin.

Also, to make the route more commercially viable, Biman is undertaking rigorous strategies including partnership with European airlines. It may be mentioned here that Biman has inked an interline agreement with ITA Airways, the flag carrier of Italy, to offer passengers onward connections beyond Rome to Italy's Venice, Genoa, Milan and many other destinations.

"However, the interline partnership between the flag carriers of the two countries is not only aimed at serving the Italy market but also entire Europe. Biman eyes to carry passengers beyond Italy even to other European points like Switzerland, Frankfurt, Paris and so on," claimed Salahuddin.

It may also be mentioned here that Biman is also in discussion with Air France-KLM for strategic partnership targeting to better serve the European market, according to Salahuddin.

Around 250,000 Bangla-deshis live in Italy. Coupled with the non-resident Bangladeshis living in other European destinations, Biman wishes to tap this huge NRB passenger segment with its first direct flight between Bangladesh and Europe, following Brexit. Even though, NRBs are the main focus among the passenger segments Biman wants to tap, the airline wishes to promote Bangladesh among Italians too as a must-visit destination.

However, it will not be plain sailing for a Bangladeshi carrier to stand out among the European airline giants that dominate the market. Hence, it is a must for Biman to ensure on-time performance, service excellence, competitive fares and perks, expressed Salahuddin. For this purpose, Biman is also offering more baggage allowance on its flights on Dhaka-Rome route.

Salahuddin further informed that currently there is no direct flight between Rome and Bangkok. Thus, Biman seeks to carry passengers from Rome to Bangkok via Dhaka as well.

By 3-6 months since launch, Biman expects to gain full load-factor on its flights on Dhaka-Rome route, according to the airline's research, mentioned Salahuddin, adding, "Biman will not be leaving the market like before. We will see to it till the end, till we rebuild passenger confidence."

Salahuddin mentioned, the cargo movement on the route also seems to be promising. From RMG to perishables like vegetables to leather goods, plenty of cargo transportation can take place from Dhaka to Rome and beyond to other destinations in Europe and the Americas through the interline agreement with ITA Airways. Hence, Salahuddin stressed that such partnership initiatives like interline, codeshare or alliance, are key to sustain in the aviation business.

Lastly, Biman's expansion efforts do not end here as launch of more new routes is on the way as well as procurement of another 10-15 aircraft with orders being finalised soon, concluded Salahuddin.