

Country's emerging helicopter industry to have 30-35 new helicopters by 2030

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Dhaka : Long hours of road commute due to horrendous traffic conditions are making a growing upper middle to upper class of the country potentially see helicopter transport as a necessary and viable option. Despite it being quite heavy on the pocket with a slashing charge of BDT 66,000 per hour, excluding VAT, more people are showing interest in helicopter travel for a time-saving journey.

Investors often fly in for a day, and visit factories in far-fetched areas of the country and return back to Dhaka on the same day; owing to the flexibility of time and quick mobility a helicopter ride offers.

Patients in critical times from anywhere in the country fly with a helicopter to the capital for emergency treatment purposes, saving plenty of hours, otherwise, wasted by horrible traffic conditions in road commute.

Even tourists in Cox's Bazar now hop into helicopters dedicated for sight-seeing while international photographers rent helicopter rides for documentary shoot purposes.

While helicopter services to transport VIPs across the country are nothing new,

we have seen helicopter rides taken by brides and grooms, religious speakers or other ordinary people becoming viral contents on social media.



These show how the country's niche market of helicopter services is growing in size.

As of 2022, 10 private aviation companies are providing charter helicopter services for corporate use, VIP transport, medical evacuation, and leisure trips with a total of 42 helicopters.

Since 2010, the country's helicopter industry has been witnessing exponential growth with yearly five helicopter inductions on average.

Captain Gulger Hossain, Director - Flight Operations of South Asian Airlines, one of the country's leading helicopter operators, said this at a media workshop organised by Aviation Operators Association of Bangladesh in the capital recently

"By 2030, 30-35 new helicopters will be inducted by different operators taking the monthly flight number to 600 or above, from the current 350 on average," he added.

It is a matter of delight that the country's private sector is about to start dedicated helicopter air medical services, mentioned Capt Gulger.

Also, in the next 1-2 years, Capt Gulger expressed, the helicopter sector of Bangladesh will have offshore capability as well.

"We will be able to support the offshore oil companies while considering international helicopter operations," he claimed.

However, helicopter services industry still largely remains a novelty and prestige product, even though Bangladesh has a rich history of helicopter operation.

The legacy of civil helicopters in the country dates back to 1950s, during the American exploration of oil and gas.

Before liberation, in 1963, Pakistan International Airlines launched the world's then biggest commercial helicopter network with scheduled helicopter flights between Dhaka and regional cities covering 20 towns and cities. Back then, passengers were charged RS 25 per hour.

In 1999, Bangladesh saw its first available helicopter for chartered flights as Best Aviation Ltd brought one BK 117 on ACMI lease and started operations including Medevac.

In 2000, Aero Technologies Ltd brought AS 350B and MI-8MTV helicopters to fly VIPs, Medevac, chartered and cargo flights.

Since then, the helicopter industry of the country has been witnessing constant growth as 10 private aviation companies - ATL Aviation Ltd, South Asian Airlines Ltd, Square Air Ltd, R&R Aviation Ltd, Meghna Aviation Ltd, BRB Air Ltd, Bangla International Airlines Ltd, Bashundhara Airways Ltd, BCL Aviation Ltd and Impress Aviation Ltd - in total, have 42 helicopters in operation currently. Yet, the country's helicopter industry still could not reach its full potential and the operators their desired goals due to regulatory issues. Gulger said there is

no alternative to the government's pro-business policy and regulatory support for this purpose.

To fly a helicopter, operators need to take permissions from a number of agencies through the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh. This lengthy process requires a day, therefore, it becomes a hindrance in times of flying for emergency medical crisis.

Another issue that is preventing helicopters to utilise its full potential is how the regulatory body has stopped permitting helicopters to land in alleviated helipads.

This makes patients that come via helicopter to Dhaka Airport suffer during long hours of road commute amid horrendous traffic conditions from the Airport to any hospital in the capital, mentioned Captain Gulger.

This brings up another issue that the helicopter industry of the country is suffering from. All helicopters have to operate from Dhaka Airport. This is preventing the increase of helicopter services. Hence, a dedicated heliport in the capital is required to boost the industry further, noted the Director of South Asian Airlines Ltd.

Capt Gulger further said, awareness among public about not flying kites near airfields and not pointing out laser lights to helicopters are also crucial as serious hazards take place due to such activities.

He mentioned, in 2020-2021, South Asian Airlines Ltd had kept a dedicated helicopter for sight-seeing in Cox's Bazar for tourists.

This initiative of heli-tourism received great response from leisure travellers. However, Capt Gulger urged regulatory support to further increase the number of such leisure flights.

"It is important for the regulatory body to see helicopter operation as a commuter service and not a luxury," concluded Capt Gulger Hossain.