

Domestic aviation ushers into new era

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Dhaka : Bangladesh has entered into a new era of domestic aviation as for the first time in its history multiple new cross-country long haul domestic routes are being launched without any connection to the capital Dhaka.

The national flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines and the biggest private carrier of the country US-Bangla Airlines have launched direct flight services on new cross-country long haul domestic routes recently. With that, the airlines have strengthened the domestic aviation sector further, during a time when domestic tourism and business travel are flourishing in the post pandemic era.

On October 7, Biman Bangladesh Airlines launched direct flights from Saidpur to Cox's Bazar. The maiden flight on the new domestic route of Biman was inaugurated by Railways Minister Md Nurul Islam Sujon at Saidpur Airport in presence of State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali.

Speaking on the occasion, Railways Minister Sujon said, the move will facilitate people of eight districts in Rangpur Division to reach Cox's Bazar directly. Hence, soon, there should be more than one weekly flight on the route.

State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali presided over the inauguration ceremony while Asaduzzaman Noor, MP from Nilphamari-2 attended the programme as the Honourable Guest.

In his speech, State Minister for MoCAT Md Mahbub Ali, said, "Saidpur is the gateway of North Bengal. We have launched flights from here to Cox's Bazar to help

the people of North Bengal to reach the popular beach destination directly for entertainment and vacation purposes."

"If the people wish, we would increase the frequency to daily on this route," the State Minister urged.

On October 7 at 11:40 am, Biman's flight BG-592 departed Saidpur Airport for Cox's Bazar with 100 per cent load factor.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines said they will operate two weekly flights from Saidpur to Cox's Bazar on Thursdays and Saturdays. Every Thursday the flight will leave Saidpur Airport at 9:20 am and at 1:25 pm on every Saturday.

Speaking to The Bangladesh Monitor, Mohammed Salahuddin, General Manager, Marketing, Biman Bangladesh Airlines, said, the carrier will also resume direct flights on another cross-country long haul domestic route Chattogram-Jashore by this year.

"In the post pandemic era, we are focusing on expanding our domestic network as demand soars," said Salahuddin, adding that, by this year, the flag carrier will resume direct flights on Sylhet-Chattogram route.

Along with Saidpur-Cox's Bazar flights, Biman also launched direct frequencies from Sylhet to Cox's Bazar on the same day.

The General Manager of Marketing mentioned they are witnessing high demand of air travel on these routes as the load factor in one month since starting has risen to 75 per cent. And it is continuously increasing. Therefore, in the next two months, Biman expects to reach a load factor of 85 per cent at least on these new routes, claimed Salahuddin.

Hence, the GM of the flag carrier said the airline will be increasing frequencies on all domestic routes, specially Cox's Bazar, by December 2021.

The airline is currently flying two daily flights from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar. By December 2021, the frequency on the route will be taken to four, and with all Boeing 737 aircraft, noted Salauddin.

Even flights on Saidpur-Cox's Bazar will be increased by introducing another frequency this month, he claimed.

On the other hand, flights of US-Bangla Airlines on new domestic routes Jashore-Chattogram and Saidpur-Chattogram started from September 30 while flights on Jashore-Cox's Bazar route began from October 1.

Civil Aviation and Tourism State Minister M Mahbub Ali inaugurated the maiden flights from Jashore and Saidpur to Chattogram of US-Bangla Airlines through ceremonies held at Jashore Airport and Saidpur Airport respectively.

Initially, the airline is operating three weekly flights from Jashore to Chattogram on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. The flights depart Jashore Airport at 9:15 am for Chattogram while the return flight leaves Chattogram Airport at 5:10 pm.

Also, from Saidpur to Chattogram, the airline operates three weekly flights on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. The flights leave Saidpur Airport at 12:35 pm while the return flights from Chattogram leave at 10:45 am.

Additionally, from October 1, the airline commenced four weekly flights from Jashore to Cox's Bazar on Saturdays, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The flights leave Jashore Airport at 1:45 pm while the return flight depart Cox's Bazar Airport at 3:25 pm.

Speaking to The Bangladesh Monitor, M Shafiqul Islam, Head of Marketing and Sales, US-Bangla Airlines, said, by this year, the airline will launch flights on Saidpur-Cox's Bazar, Sylhet-Chattogram-Cox's Bazar, Barishal-Chattogram, and Saidpur-Jashore routes.

He said, three more brand new ATR 72-600 aircraft are coming to the airline's fleet

to increase their flight operations on the new cross-country long haul domestic routes.

Compared to pre-pandemic times, the airline already has recovered 90 per cent of capacity in the domestic market, added Shafiqul. This shows how domestic travel has soared in the post pandemic era while international travel is taking more time to return to the old normal.

US-Bangla is currently operating 37 flights daily across all domestic routes.

At the inauguration of the new cross-country long haul domestic routes of US-Bangla, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali, said, the country's aviation industry will grow almost threefold over the next 15 years.

Bangladesh's aviation sector has almost doubled by 2017 while passenger and cargo transportation has grown at a rate of about 10 per cent in the last 10 years, the State Minister added.

The State Minister noted investment in the aviation sector has also increased along with other businesses. In addition to the state-owned carrier, two private airlines are also doing well in aviation business, he mentioned.

Reopen unutilised airports

As traffic increases on long roads, people are now turning more and more to air travel to save time and energy. As a result, we are seeing new cross-country long haul domestic air routes emerging and all of them are witnessing great load factors. With that, the call for reopening six unutilised airports across the country is becoming even stronger.

During the British Rule, six airports were established in Pabna's Ishwardi, Thakurgaon, Moulovibazar's Shamshernagar, Cumilla, Bagura and Lalmonirhat respectively. However, due to low demand and passenger crisis, the airports were later closed.

But now the situation is different, said stakeholders of the aviation sector.

A new potential has emerged surrounding Ishwardi Airport because of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project, said Pabna-4 (Atgharia-Ishwardi) former Member of Parliament Monzur Rahman Bishwas.

People of Habiganj and Moulovibazar are having to use Sylhet Airport for air travel. This requires more time and energy. If Shamshernagar Airport reopens, these people will benefit greatly, said former President of Moulovibazar Chamber of Commerce and Industries MA Ahad.

Masud Parvez Khan, President of Cumilla Chamber of Commerce, said, Cumilla has become a significant economic zone of the country. There is an airport-adjacent EPZ here. However, due to lack of air connectivity, foreign investors are not coming and the EPZ is being of no use.

Shafiqul of US-Bangla said they have been in efforts to pursue CAAB to reopen the unutilised airports of the country so that they can begin flight operations to and from those airports as well.

"If CAAB extends the runway of Ishwardi Airport by only 500 meters, we can operate flight operations to and from the airport by small aircraft such as ATR 72-600," he claimed, adding, there is great demand of air travel on the route which is untapped.

However, Salahuddin of Biman said, they cannot plan on operating flights to and from the unutilised airports unless and until CAAB develops those airports and permits the airlines to operate flights there.

On this note, Md Mahbub Ali, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism, said, "Works are underway at Dhaka Airport for the establishment of the Third Terminal. Also, we are carrying out development works at Cox's Bazar, Saidpur and Jashore

airports. Once these are done, we will take on projects to reopen the unutilised airports."