

HSIA infrastructure limitation, scanner breakdown hampering air cargo export

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Dhaka : Bangladesh air cargo transport industry is witnessing an unprecedented growth of demand at the moment, as it regains much of the transshipment market it was earlier losing to India. However, due to infrastructure limitations, lack of facilities and constant breakdown of equipment at the capital's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, the country is failing to ensure smooth and on-time air cargo transport amid the current peak demand.

Talking to The Bangladesh Monitor, Group Captain Muhammed Kamrul Islam, Executive Director of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, informed, the airport is currently exporting about 800-850 tonnes of air cargo a day.

About 40 carriers transport export air cargo from Dhaka Airport at the moment in belly capacity of passenger planes as well as through

dedicated freighters.

However, according to airline representatives, due to constant breakdowns of cargo scanners at the export cargo terminal of HSIA, backlogs have become a common phenomenon at the airport.

For instance, on September 24, flights of various airlines were forced to leave without cargo, as all four explosive-detection scanners (EDSs) of the export cargo terminal were out of order. As a result, some 250 tonnes of cargo was left stuck at Dhaka Airport that day.

It may be mentioned here, out of the four EDSs at the export cargo terminal, two are near-permanently out of action. On September 24 midnight, another was repaired alongside efforts to fix the fourth, after "excessive pressure" caused faults, according to airline representatives.

This mainly hampered the transport of UK and Europe-bound cargo, as they must go through EDSs. Hence, many planes left the airport without carrying their scheduled cargo.

In response, HSIA Executive Director claimed, about five scanners in non-RA3 area and two scanners (EDSs) in RA3 area are currently available at the airport.

Of the two EDSs, one is presently functional, while another will be fixed by early October, he informed.

The Executive Director further added, in case of any EDS serviceability issue, the export cargo terminal has two dual view x-ray machines and EDD process by trained dogs to send RA3 cargo for export.

When the scanners are out of order-which is often-the shipments are checked by explosive detection dogs, and that causes significant delays, according to stakeholders. This is why, backlogs tend to be a common phenomenon at Dhaka Airport's export cargo terminal, claimed the airline officials.

However, industry stakeholders are bewildered why the airport authorities do not permanently solve the scanner crisis. According to freight forwarders, they pay 10 cents per kg for cargo scanning purposes.

With three days of that money, the authorities can get a new machine,

claimed the stakeholders. Yet, the airport does not have any backup scanner, sighed forwarders.

On top of it, when machines remain down, besides delay in deliveries, stakeholders also fall prey to corruption, as then they have to pay BDT 1500 per tonnes to the authorities to reserve early spots, expressed forwarders.



Md Kamrul Islam, Executive Director, HSIA

Furthermore, another surprising issue is there seems to be no repairer or maintenance personnel at the airport for the scanning machines.

Therefore, they stressed the necessity of backup scanning machines at the airport. They also expect machine repairers or maintenance personnel to be on standby.

Apart from the frequent breakdown of scanners, limited cargo area, inadequate RA3 zone and manpower crisis at the export cargo terminal further add to the growing list of stakeholders' worries.

Abundance of freighters

Currently, the market is at such a peak that airlines are operating staggering numbers of dedicated freighters to and from Dhaka Airport, apart from their passenger flights, to meet the increasing demand of air cargo transport.

A lot of additional freighter capacity has been added by Middle Eastern carriers to ease the rush, explained the industry stakeholders.

For instance, Qatar Airways alone operates about nine freighters a week, apart from their three passenger flights a day. In total, the airline carries about 150 tonnes of air cargo daily--hailing the highest market share, about 35 per cent.

Saudia also transports 100 tonnes a day across its five flights a day from Dhaka Airport. Emirates, on the other hand, carries 50-60 tonnes of air cargo a day in belly capacity across three passenger flights.

Double demand

On the other hand, thanks to the rising rates of air cargo transport in

India's Delhi, the previously lost market is returning to Bangladesh, expressed airline representatives.

In 2023, about 8000 metric tonnes of the country's cargo were transshipped by Delhi Airport (DEL) to various destinations worldwide. This resulted in a missed opportunity for Dhaka Airport's operator Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh and the ground handler Biman Bangladesh Airlines to earn over BDT 156 crore in export cargo handling earnings.

Earlier, the fees at Delhi Airport were so less than Dhaka's that it was cheaper to send cargo via trucks from Dhaka to Delhi and then ship them by air to various destinations in the world.

However, the ever-increasing flow of Bangladesh cargo and protests from Indian freight forwarders eventually led to the rise of rates in the neighbouring country. As a result, forwarders are bringing back their cargo to Dhaka Airport, as per the airline representatives.

Coupled with the geopolitics-related disruption in cargo movement via the Red Sea, the aforementioned reason has blessed Bangladesh's export cargo industry to welcome double than usual demand at the moment, claimed the airline representatives.

Nevertheless, with bigger air cargo volumes, come higher rates.

At present, the rate to Europe from Bangladesh is USD 7-8 per kg, according to industry stakeholders.

However, to the US, the rate is about USD 9-10, depending on the carrier and route, they further concluded.