

## Low-cost carriers robbing passengers with equal fare as legacies

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Dhaka : Amid doubling and tripling of airfares to countries in the Middle East, foreign low-cost carriers operating in Bangladesh are robbing passengers off, especially the hardworking migrants, with fares equal or at times even higher than legacy carriers.

With lack of amenities, restricted legroom, less baggage allowance, no inflight meal, no travel benefits and no refund facility - everything that legacy airlines offer - budget carriers are supposed to offer passengers air tickets at a more reasonable price. Furthermore, budget airlines have significantly lower cost bases, which are supposed to translate into lower fares, which they used to do in the pre-pandemic era.

However, after the coronavirus pandemic, when Bangladesh reopened its sky and the airlines resumed operating international flights, airfares to Middle East started surging like never before. In months, airfares to different Middle Eastern destinations doubled and tripled.



As soon as the nascent travel sector started to revive with wounds still fresh from the pandemic induced slump, all airlines operating to and from Middle East and

Bangladesh bit it in the neck as they spiked up their fares to amounts double or even triple in a matter of a few months.

But what comes as a bigger surprise is the fact that even low-cost carriers like Jazeera Airways, SalamAir, Air Arabia, and Flydubai are charging as much as their legacy counterparts.

These budget carriers, without any investment in Bangladesh or market promotion efforts, are doing unethical business by taking advantage of the country's migrant labours desperate to return to their workplaces and robbing them off in these dire times.

Even though, some of these low-cost airlines claim to provide passengers with a few snacks onboard or some level of baggage allowance, it still does not justify the increase of airfare to levels twofold or threefold than earlier, equivalent to legacy airlines, or sometimes even higher.

For instance, currently, for flights on Dhaka-New York route, which takes 23 hours, different legacy airlines are charging BDT 65-70 thousand per ticket. Surprisingly, on the other hand, budget airlines such as Jazeera Airways, SalamAir, Air Arabia, and Flydubai are charging BDT 80 thousand-BDT 1 lac for six-hour long flights to Riyadh, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Muscat, Jeddah and Medina.

Before the pandemic, airfare on such routes to the Middle East were BDT 20-25 thousand. In November 2021, the prices went up to BDT 40-45 thousand while in December they rose to BDT 70-90 thousand. And now, the prices have reached over BDT 1 lac even.

With more demand and less supply due to the pandemic induced travel curbs, airlines operating flights to and from Middle East and Bangladesh are leaving no stones unturned to take advantage of the travel uptick, especially the migrant traffic, and budget airlines such as Jazeera Airways, SalamAir, Air Arabia, and Flydubai are no exception.

Due to the unreasonable hike of airfare to the Middle East, woes of expatriate workers know no bounds. Their immigration cost has increased significantly making Bangla-desh falling behind in competition with other countries.

Such excessive amounts of airfare are not possible for the hardworking expatriate workers to bear. Many are failing to fly back to their respective workplaces in the Middle East. Hence, they are losing their jobs while their visas get expired.

Even those who barely manage to buy an air ticket, could only do so by selling off their properties or taking loans only to afford such illogical airfare.

Many migrant labours are missing their flights due to long queues at Dhaka Airport. And, since air tickets of budget airlines are non-refundable, unlike legacy carriers, migrants are straight up losing money if they miss their flights.

Monsur Ahmed Kalam, President of Association of Travel Agencies of Bangladesh, a platform of around 3,500 registered travel agencies, said, the move to charge such unreasonably high airfare to Middle East by budget carriers is "illogical and unethical".

"We have sought the government's help to force these airlines to reduce their airfare but to no avail till now," he sighed.

Another crisis the passengers are facing right now is the shortage of tickets, mentioned ATAB President. "All tickets are booked for the next 2-3 months in the Global Distribution System (GDS). You will only find air tickets on dates that are 2-3 months away."

This means the airlines are giving away advance group tickets to a handful of agencies. They are not keeping unsold seats visible online. This unethical practice is leading to the shortage of tickets amid plenty of travel demand which ultimately

results in the increase of airfare.

"Airlines are the ones to blame as they are controlling this syndicate," claimed Kalam.

Bangladesh currently has a demand of 5000 departing labour traffic every day. However, we can only get 2500-3000 seats. So, a shortage of 2000-2500 seats remains. This is what the airlines are taking advantage of.

To make it clearer, Kalam pointed out the airfare difference between us and our neighbouring countries. Currently, flights from Colombo to Riyadh costs BDT 35 thousand, flights from Nepal to Riyadh BDT 45 thousand, and from Mumbai/Kolkata to Riyadh BDT 32-40 thousand.

Yet, these airlines are draining our expatriates' pockets with fares double or triple, noted the ATAB leader. "They should have earned couple of hundred crores with the increased fares by now," he added.

To solve the crisis, Kalam urged an increase of flight frequencies to meet the demand. Since Dhaka Airport is closed at night, the government can operate additional flights from the other two international airports in Chattogram and Sylhet, he suggested.

The Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh have major roles to play to stop this unethical practice, expressed Manzur Murshed Mahbub, Ex-President of ATAB.

"Airfares are supposed to be approved by the authorities. Hence, MoCAT, CAAB and ATAB should be more diligent in this regard. Like our neighbouring countries, these authorities and associations can speak to the airlines and enforce reasonable fare upon them," he added.

He further mentioned, "The association's role is to integrate the airlines and the government together. ATAB failed to this purpose."

He stressed how one-way fare on Dhaka-Dubai/Jeddah or any other Middle East route can be over BDT 1 lac while the return fare on Brussels-Dhaka route is BDT 80 thousand only. "The government must monitor the fares," Mahbub claimed.

Along with the migrants, Umrah pilgrims are also suffering due to the excessive price hike of air tickets on routes to Medina and Mecca, explained Shahadat Hossain Taslim, President of Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh.

"Airlines must act responsibly and stop this unethical business practice. They are international organisations which should follow global rules and norms," Taslim claimed.

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