

## Opening stalled domestic airports, increasing int'l capacity imminent to make Bangladesh smart aviation hub

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 16 March, 2023



Dhaka : The government is now considering to open old airports that are currently shut down alongside increasing the capacities of the international ones in an effort to promote smart aviation as air travel demand rises in the country.

Domestic air travel is now at all-time high with 25 lac passengers a year and it is expected to surpass 50 lac annual passengers in the coming years. For this purpose, the government ponders whether to resume flight operations at five Short Take-Off and Landing (STOL) airports in the country to facilitate the growth of domestic air travel.

Md Mahbub Ali, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism said this as the Chief Guest at a seminar held at Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in the capital on March 2.

"While the current growth of the country's aviation sector is already the highest in the region, it is expected to triple in the next 15 years. By 2038, Bangladesh will have the capacity to handle 22 million passengers a year," mentioned the State Minister.



There are five airports in the country-Ishwardi, Thakurgaon, Lalmonirhat, Shamshearnagar, and Cumilla-that are currently closed but have immense air travel potential as the country's economy is flourishing and people's living standard is increasing.

Flight services used to be operated at these five airports earlier. However, due to various issues and lack of passengers, flights were gradually suspended over the years.

However, to meet the current growing demand for air travel in these areas and connect all parts of the country by air, the government has under consideration the move to open the stalled airports, added the State Minister.

Initially, the government can offer some stimulus or subsidy to attract the airlines to operate flights to and from these airports, the seminar addressed.



The seminar titled "Capacity building of international airports and opening of stalled domestic airports in Bangladesh" was organised by The Bangladesh Monitor and supported by Eastern Bank Ltd.

Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, Editor of The Daily Observer attended the seminar as the Guest of Honour while the keynote paper was presented by Wg Cdr (Retd) ATM Nazrul Islam, Managing Director, United Airways (BD) Ltd.

Due to the Russia-Ukraine war and some lingering impact of Covid-19, international air transport is witnessing a temporary drop to 35 lac passengers currently, compared to 86 lac passengers in 2019. However, the passenger number is sure to surpass pre-pandemic levels in the following years, noted the keynote presentation.

Moreover, once the Third Terminal of Dhaka Airport opens, it will have to handle an additional one crore of passengers, two crores in total. Therefore, it is crucial for Dhaka Airport as well as other international airports in the country to build further capacity to facilitate air travel growth.

Currently, Dhaka Airport operates 250 flights a day by 30-32 airlines. Of them, only four are local airlines while the rest are foreign.

To handle the growth of passenger flow once T3 opens, the airport must operate over 400 flights a day by 2030 and over 600 flights daily by 2035, the keynote presentation included.

However, due to infrastructure limitations, airlines cannot increase flights to and from these airports. A new terminal at Dhaka Airport will not be enough to facilitate the air travel growth alone.

For this purpose, the seminar urged a dependent parallel runway at Dhaka Airport immediately.

On the other hand, helicopter operations are currently running from Dhaka Airport only, which hamper both the airport and helicopters' services.

A separate heliport has not seen the light of day yet, whereas, it is high time it should, also addressed the seminar.

The seminar was presided over by Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman, Chairman of Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

CAAB Chairman mentioned various initiatives the authorities have undertaken to develop the capacities of all airports in the county. Dhaka Airport is getting a new control tower, advanced radar system and ultramodern air-traffic management, he said.

All the three international Airports-Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet-and Cox's Bazar Airport are getting Instrument Landing System upgraded to Category Two.

The airports are also getting RVR machine to have better runway

visibility and runway approach lights being placed.

Dhaka Airport will also get a parallel runway, claimed the CAAB Chairman.

He added that a separate area for heliport has been selected in Dhaka. Soon, further works to establish the separate heliport will be underway.

The seminar further addressed that there are 31 airstrip fields in the country. Of them, only four are being operated by Bangladesh Air Force while the others are left unutilised as these airstrip fields are not in the possession of CAAB.

However, these airstrip fields can also be used as STOL airports for domestic flight and helicopter operations.

In this regard, the Chairman said that CAAB will be taking possession over all the airstrip fields in a year and utilise them to facilitate the booming air travel growth.

Nevertheless, industry stakeholders and experts at the seminar expressed that even considering the ongoing development efforts, Dhaka Airport will run out of capacity in the next 5-7 years.

Hence, as an alternative, an aviation city for the future should be established outside Dhaka with an airport having two or more runways, modern connectivity, huge cargo village, proper security, effective management, efficient ground handling, state-of-the-art training centre, tourist facilities and other aviation related businesses.

The seminar was moderated by Kazi Wahidul Alam, Editor of The Bangladesh Monitor. On behalf of Eastern Bank Ltd, Ziaul Karim, Head of Communications and External Affairs addressed the session with opening remarks.

The discussant panel included Mofizur Rahman, Managing Director of NOVOAIR, Air Cdr Dr Md Mahbub Zaman Khan, Director Corporate Training and Planning of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, Md Abdul Malek, Chief Engineer, CAAB, Air Cdr Md Anwarul Haque Sardar (Retd), COO, Meghna Aviation Ltd and Ahmed Yusuf Walid, President and CEO,

Galaxy Bangladesh Group, among others.