

Sufferings of domestic air travellers likely to end soon

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Dhaka : The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), has - after long last - taken initiative to make domestic air travel of the country more efficient and user-friendly. With the completion of the current development plans, sufferings of the air travellers are expected to end to a great extent.

This is what Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman, Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) indicated while recently talking to Kazi Wahidul Alam and Tanvir Shams, Editor and Reporter of The Bangladesh Monitor. He provided detail picture of the development activities now underway.

Air transport, it must be noted, is the most convenient mode of transportation in the twenty-first century and its attraction is increasing day by day.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) expects 7.8 billion passengers to travel in 2036; a near doubling of the four billion air travellers flew in 2016. The prediction is based on a 3.6 per cent average Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR).

Bangladesh scene

It may be recalled that the World War II indirectly helped brought modern aviation to Bangladesh. Civil aviation in Bangladesh developed around military airstrips,

built by British in early 1940s for the purpose of the war. End of the war saw these airports abandoned.

Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, these abandoned airports, formed the foundation of civil aviation in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

In the early 1950s-during Pakistan period, Chattogram, Sylhet. and Jashore airports became an important part of domestic civil aviation. Later, Chattogram and Sylhet were transformed into international airports, but the necessity of development of Jashore Airport was ignored.

In Bangladesh, at present there are three international airports -- Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka; Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram and Osmani International Airport in Sylhet.

In addition, there are five operating domestic airports in Jashore, Cox's Bazar, Rajshahi, Saidpur and Barisal.

The number of carriers operating in domestic market of Bangladesh has grown from one state-owned player - Biman Bangladesh Airlines_ in 1993 to four now, with three more private airlines_ Regent Airways, Novo Air and US-Bangla Airlines. Biman reentered domestic market in 2014.

Growth of air travel

Air travel demand in domestic sector of Bangladesh has experienced healthy growth. The trend of growth both in passenger and cargo is expected to continue in near future with increased industrialisation and economic development

Until 1984, Bangladesh had only one international airport and one airline. At present, aviation activities are being carried out from three international and five domestic airports. Four local airlines - national carrier Biman and three other local private airlines, are operating services on domestic and international routes.

Keeping pace with global trend, Bangladesh market - both international and domestic-has also increased. But poor infrastructure in all the domestic airports in the country is making experience of domestic air travellers bitter.

Importance of air travel

Bangladesh is a small country where the distances between the major cities are not large enough for air transportation to be very necessary and urgent. But it is competitive with other modes if surface transportation time is considered. Rivers of different sizes crisscross most of this country, which is a great barrier for surface transportation. Fast and continuous road or rail network does not exist in many areas of the country.

In general, railway is inefficient and slow and roadways are highly congested and accident-prone. Thus, a relatively low level of service for surface transportation enhances the market for domestic air travel.

The increase in economic activity has made impact on the domestic air transportation in Bangladesh. Its importance increased further, if the elements of time, speed and efficiency are considered for other mode of transportation of the country.

Poor infrastructure

Through privatisation of air transportation in Bangladesh, the government has opened up a new horizon but has not taken necessary follow-up measures to guide and support the nascent industry. For long, no proper upgradation of facilities of domestic airports, as required, was done.

It is relevant to mention here that before emergence of private airlines, CAAB used to handle, only one carrier - government owned Biman Bangladesh Airlines. The workload and manpower requirement of CAAB was comparatively much low. The workload multiplied and diversified with the operation of private airlines in both

domestic and international sectors.

Development ignored

The existing facilities at most of the domestic airports - both landside and airside areas - were built to serve the traffic of just one DC-3 or F-27 or F-28 or ATP flights a day. In the decades between 1950s and 1980s, the airport handled once a day, flight of one of these small commercial aircraft.

Passenger load during the decades, mentioned above was low as available seat capacity was also low. There was also no demand for cargo. Thus, the facilities the airports had at that time were enough for the number of passenger traffic.

But thing started changing with the advent of private airlines in the decade of 1990s. With the start of flight operation by number of private airlines, domestic airports got great boost in capacity - as a result demand increased significantly.

In recent years, traffic - both passenger and cargo - of all the airports has registered significant growth and are showing further growth potentials. But unfortunately, facilities have failed to keep pace. As a result, travellers are suffering due to lack of basic facilities.

Lack of facilities

The present terminal building was constructed decades ago when only daily one flight and occasionally two flights used to use the airport. The airport has no important basic facilities like arrival hall and language delivery system.

Luggage are delivered in open space, outside the terminal building. So, adverse weather condition increases plight of travellers to a great extent.

The existing terminal buildings are too small even to accommodate passengers of more than two flights of small domestic aircraft at a time.

Even, the runways of the airports except Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet and Cox's Bazar -- are not long and strong enough to handle comparatively small aircraft like Boeing 737, now operated by most of the domestic airlines.

The terminal facilities for domestic air travellers in almost all the airports of the country are very poor.

Except Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet, condition existing in all other domestic airports are similarly poor. These airports are suffering from neglect and devoid of providing basic facilities for the movement of passengers and cargo traffic.

Cargo movement

Along with growth in passenger traffic, air cargo has also registered significant growth and has great potentials.

With the introduction of prawn culture in greater Khulna area, flower cultivation in greater Jashore and industrial commodities in greater Kushtia, the volume of air cargo movement has increased greatly.

In addition to growth in passenger movement, presently everyday three to four cargo aircraft with prawn fries are moving between Coxes Bazar and Jashore for quick delivery to the growers in Satkhira and Bagerhat.

Shipments of fresh flowers, vegetables, fruits and some industrial commodities are also recording healthy growth in recent years at Jashore airport.

Unfortunately, however cargo handling capacity and facilities at domestic airports including Jashore and Cox's Bazar are close to zero.

Had there been proper handling facilities, shipment of fresh products like flowers, fruits, vegetables and fish, poultry and other perishable agro-based product, would get great boost from all the domestic airports.

Great potentials

There is hardly any doubt that domestic airports in general and Jashore Airport in particular have great development potentials and could be turned as air hubs of the

respective region of the country.

It is really sad that at present there is no air access to outside world including neighbouring India and Nepal for the people of entire Khulna, Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions.

Upgraded airports can serve as important catalyst for regional economic growth, enhancing the economic performance of other sectors and facilitating the inward investment in services, products and tourism that helps communities to flourish.

There is hardly any disagreement that upgradation of domestic airports will facilitate regional community to be part of the national economic and social fabric.

This far, the question of up gradation has failed to get the attention it deserved and end result is that the airports are in deplorable condition.

Proper development of all the domestic airports of the country has now become a must for the interest of domestic air travellers and greater economic development of the country.

Time has come to end the neglect immediately and start proper development of the airports-both landside and airside-so that the airport can handle larger aircraft and handle passenger and cargo traffic with better facilities.

CAAB upgrading all airports

The long wait for proper passenger facility at all the domestic airports seems to be going to end. And with it, suffering of domestic air travellers is also expected to minimise greatly.

Chattogram Airport

Since Chattogram is witnessing many EPZs and new ports being established, soon we will have huge economic and trade activities taking place in the city, noted Rahman. Thus, already the cargo area of Chattogram Airport has been extended a bit. And even the terminals, both passenger and cargo, will go through expansion works soon. It was scheduled to take place a while back, but due to the pandemic the work got delayed. However, the plan is ready so is CAAB now to proceed with the operation.

Furthermore, asked about if Chattogram Airport would become under-utilised when Cox's Bazar Airport will be international, the CAAB Chairman said Cox's Bazar will share the load of Chattogram. Because the latter does not yet has sufficient cargo infrastructure and facility to bear the amount of business activities taking place in the city.

Sylhet airport

CAAB is already done with the runway expansion work of Osmani International Airport in Sylhet. Any type of aircraft including 777 and 787 can land and take off now. Refueling facilities of the aircraft have also been established. Now CAAB has headed to the terminal expansion work which is stated to complete by 2023.

Cox's Bazar Airport

Cox's Bazar will also go through a runway extension soon, of 9000-10,700 feet. By January, CAAB is hoping to complete the tender proceedings. This will allow any aircraft from 777 to 787 to land at and take off from the airport.

For tourism, Cox's Bazar is currently working as the hub. The government is currently prioritising the popular tourist destination as the focal point of our country's inbound tourism. So once the sea-based tourism develops, Cox's Bazar will be booming with tourism and economic activities.

"When we will have further developments in infrastructure and facilities such as an international airport, the major load of tourism movement will head to the South freeing Dhaka of it by significant amount," mentioned Rahman, adding, "this is how we have prepared the aviation master plan and are acting accordingly."

Saidpur Airport

Saidpur Airport on the other hand has been decided to be made a regional airport for South-Asia or South-east Asia. Countries like Nepal, Bhutan and India should be able to use it for emergency purposes, claimed the CAAB Chairman.

Saidpur airport will also have a runway expansion of 10,000 feet allowing any type of aircraft to land and take off, the Chairman mentioned.

Since land communication is improving, air connectivity will further bolster the trade between Bangladesh and these countries. Due to this, the northern area of the country will witness further economic expansion and flourish even more, he added.

Other airports

Moreover, the new terminal at Jashore airport will be complete by this February, said Rahman.

Also, from February, terminal expansion at Rajshahi Airport will begin. Saidpur, Jashore and Rajshahi airports will have their runways newly overlaid too, he stated.