

## BD aviation slowly but surely recovering from COVID-19: Industry officials

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Dhaka: Since the resumption of scheduled passenger flights from June, the aviation industry of Bangladesh is slowly but surely recovering from the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Mohammed Mohijur Rahman Javed, Sales Manager, Emirates Bangladesh and Kamrul Islam, General Manager, US-Bangla Airlines both agreed at the talk show Shadharon Bima: Probidhir Orthiniti hosted by Shanta Rahman which aired on Channel i on September 5.

However, it will take a while, till 2024, for the capacity to return to pre-pandemic levels, mentioned both the sales managers, referring to IATA's estimation.

“Right now, Emirates is gradually adjusting its flight frequencies according to the coronavirus situation. We resumed with three weekly flights initially. Now we are currently operating seven weekly flights to and from Dhaka,” said Md Mohijur Rahman Javed, Sales Manager, Emirates Bangladesh.

However, Javed expressed his hopes that “in six months, we will see more significant development”.

US-Bangla also increased its flight frequencies domestically since the resumption of flights. Currently the carrier is operating flights to all the domestic airports of Bangladesh.

“We are witnessing month-on-month growth in domestic passenger movement since June. If this continues, we might be able to reach pre-pandemic levels by winter,” said Kamrul Islam, General Manager, US-Bangla Airlines.

Cargo operations, on the other hand, have been a significant booster of revenue even during the early stages of the pandemic in the country when passenger flights were suspended.

Since April, US-Bangla has been operating cargo flights with their passenger aircraft to several destinations including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Kolkata.

Emirates also exported a significant amount of cargo, mostly medical equipment, to several destinations amid the pandemic keeping the economy of the country mobile during harsh times.

Javed further mentioned the first-of-its-kind insurance facility Emirates is offering to its passenger amid the coronavirus pandemic valid till October 31. The COVID-19 insurance of Emirates covers a passenger up to 30 days after travel.

When asked about the increase in air fare, Kamrul said that the newly imposed airport development and passenger security fees, a total of BDT 170 in domestic, are hampering the passenger turnout a bit.

If these fees were imposed later in better circumstances, then it would have been easier for the passengers to cope with it, he added.

Also the limit of passenger occupancy set by CAAB also contributed a bit to the increase in air fare, said both the managers.

Since the airlines are having less of an opportunity to earn revenue due to limiting themselves to carry only 75 per cent of the capacity while the operation cost remains the same, slight increase in air fare is only reasonable to manage the costs, said Kamrul.

While Javed claimed that when flight frequencies will increase further on international routes to handle the current strong passenger demand, the fares will automatically come down.

Also, to help the airlines survive the crisis, Kamrul urged the government to step up and waive the several aeronautical and non-aeronautical charges which are comparatively higher in Bangladesh than other countries. The cost of jet fuel is another important cost that need to be reduced, he claimed, adding, it alone covers 40 per cent of the total operational cost.

Nonetheless, now is the time to make short term plans, agreed the managers. There

is no other alternative. Because the airlines might have to change their plan according to the circumstances any moment.

Every move of the airlines now depends on the travel restrictions imposed by the respective countries, operational directives set by the government authorities and the fluctuation of affected COVID-19 cases in the destinations they operate in. However, amidst all challenges, the way the aviation industry of Bangladesh is slowly progressing, both the managers mentioned they see a light of hope at the end of the tunnel.