

Bhairahawa Airport eyes expansion with new flights, fifth freedom operations

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Dhaka: Gautam Buddha International Airport in Bhairahawa, Nepal, is moving ahead with plans to significantly expand flight operations, with the aim of achieving full international capacity.

Airport General Manager Shyam Kishor Sah said the management is coordinating with airlines to increase flights beginning from the upcoming summer schedule, with efforts also underway to regularize currently limited international services.

So far, Thai AirAsia is the only airline that conducts international operations at the airport, running twice-weekly winter flights targeting Buddhist pilgrims. The airport plans to expand these services in the next season to strengthen connectivity along the Buddhist circuit linking Lumbini and Gaya, promoting religious tourism.

A key part of the expansion strategy involves introducing fifth freedom flight operations. Under this policy, foreign carriers would be allowed to use Bhairahawa as a transit hub to operate onward services to third countries.

"For example, Qatar Airways could operate Doha-Bhairahawa-third country flights and return along the same route," General Manager Sah explained.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal has begun the necessary policy and technical preparations for the arrangement, and a government decision is expected shortly.

Another initiative involves stationing a Nepal Airlines aircraft at Bhairahawa, which is expected to ensure more regular and reliable international operations. RUPANDEHI-4 Member of Parliament Kanhaiya Baniya confirmed the Nepalese national carrier will soon establish the airport as a base.

Charter operations are also active at the airport. Kuwait Airways is currently flying Nepali workers from Kuwait City to Bhairahawa, while flights from Dammam, Saudi Arabia, are pending approval. Sah emphasized that both charter and scheduled services will be given equal priority.

Stakeholders anticipate that fully operational international flights will boost religious tourism centered on Lumbini, improve travel convenience for Nepalis working abroad, and stimulate broader regional economic activity, ultimately benefiting Nepal's overall tourism industry.

Gautam Buddha International Airport, the second international airport in Nepal, has been struggling for years to sustain regular international flights despite having adequate infrastructure.

The newly unveiled expansion strategy is part of broader efforts to position the airport as an alternative to Tribhuvan International Airport, which currently serves as Nepal's primary international gateway and faces year-long congestion due to its insufficient capacity.