

## Biman under heavy criticism over unusual one-off flight to Toronto

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Dhaka: Biman Bangladesh Airlines on March 26 will be launching a never heard before “experimental commercial flight” from Dhaka to Toronto, allegedly with a poor number of commercial passengers but a large member delegation team flying for free – wasting crores of takas – while scheduled commercial flights on the route will not begin any sooner than June.

For this unusual move, the national flag carrier was caught under heavy fire at a press meet organised by the High Commission of Canada in Dhaka at a city hotel on March 24.

Md Mahbub Ali, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism attended the press meet as the chief guest while Dr Lilly Nicholis, High Commissioner of Canada to Bangladesh, was present as the honourable guest.

Dr Md Mahbub Jahan Khan, Director, Corporate Planning and Training of Biman was also present on the occasion in absence of the airline’s Managing Director and CEO Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal.

Speaking on the occasion, Mahbub Ali, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism said, the experimental commercial flight will depart Dhaka Airport on March 26 at 11:30 pm and

reach Toronto's Pearson Airport at 7:15 am on March 27 while the return flight will leave Toronto at 10:00 am on March 29 and land in Dhaka at 12:15 am on March 30.

The flight will be operated by Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner.

However, this will be a one-off flight, the State Minister added, mentioning, "Once Canada completes its boarding automation works at its airport, scheduled commercial flights will begin on the route from June with three weekly services."

Nevertheless, a journalist said to learn that only a handful of commercial passengers will be on the maiden one-off flight to Toronto while a large number of member delegation have occupied the rest of the seats for free.

Another claimed, Biman earlier mentioned the appointment of a general sales agent, consultation with Transport Canada Civil Aviation (TCCA) and setting up Biman's office in Canada, to be the purposes of this massive delegation's visit to the country.

If that is true, such purposes do not require a massive member delegation to visit Canada.

Journalists further mentioned that the delegation visiting Canada on the one-off flight includes officials of Biman, the Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry, and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), as well as their family members.

Such a complimentary or a pleasure trip will cost Biman crores of taka, claimed media persons at the event.

In response, State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahbub Ali said, "We are not going to Canada to look for GSAs or set up Biman's office. Flights can be operated without GSAs even. Many airlines are doing so. On the other hand, we have already established Biman's office in Canada. We will be inaugurating it during this visit."

The State Minister further stressed, "We wanted to begin scheduled commercial flights from March 26. However, it was Canada who asked us to wait till June as they are yet to complete their boarding automation. Hence, we have no choice but to operate scheduled commercial flights from June."

Then why the one-off flight on March 26? State Minister answered, "Because it is a matter of prestige for Bangladesh. We have decided to operate this historic flight between Bangladesh and Canada on the special occasion of the country's Golden Jubilee and 50<sup>th</sup> Independence Day. So we will, if not scheduled, then one-off it is."

However, to prevent it from being a loss, Biman decided to carry commercial passengers too, making the maiden flight an experimental but commercial flight, explained the State Minister.

Dr Md Mahbub Jahan Khan, Director, Corporate Planning and Training of Biman, shared, on the departing flight from Dhaka, Biman will be carrying 120 passengers and 130 passengers on the return flight.

In response to the allegations made by journalists that, of the 120 passengers flying to Toronto, majority is delegation members, Mahbub Jahan said, "So far, on the departing

flight, 30 commercial passengers have booked tickets in Economy Class, each at BDT 75,800 (one-way) and six commercial passengers in Business Class, each at BDT 1 lac 11 thousand (one-way).”

He further added, “On the return flight, 19 passengers have booked tickets, of them five are in Business Class and the rest Economy.”

Also, Mahbub Jahan clarified the allegation that the experimental flight is costing BDT 8-10 crore. “Instead, it is costing Biman BDT 4 crore,” he expressed.

Furthermore, journalists reminded the head table of Biman’s manipulation and deception. They alleged, earlier, on the day when Biman opened ticket booking for the flight in the morning, the airline showed the tickets were sold out by the afternoon on the same day.

In response, Mahbub Jahan again emphasised on the announcement Biman made later that tickets for the flight is still available for booking.

Lastly, since Biman is operating a 298 seater Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner on the route, journalists asked why the airline decided not to carry that much of passengers on the maiden flight.

In reply, Mahbub Jahan, answered, “We are having to reroute our maiden flight currently. Earlier, we could have flown over the Russian airspace. But now we cannot do so due to the war with Ukraine. So the flight will take two hours longer.”

“From June, the commercial flights from Dhaka will take 16 hours while the return from Canada will take 15 hours. But the maiden flight on March 26 because of the rerouting will take 18 hours from Dhaka and 16 hours from Canada.”

Since, the flight time increased, Biman has decided to carry 120-130 passengers only on the 298 seater aircraft for the experiment flight. However, on the scheduled flight, the airline will carry the usual 298 passengers, reassured Mahbub Jahan.

He further added, on the scheduled flights, since the flight time will be two hours less than the upcoming experimental one, Biman will be able to save 12 tons of fuel. In exchange of which, the airline will be able to carry at least 80 passengers more.

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