

Reinstate at least limited scheduled flights, not special ones

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 15 April, 2021



Dhaka: The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have affected the thinking process of policy makers. This is reflected in certain measures taken during the ongoing lockdown. Total ban on all schedule international flights is one such action.

From immediate reaction of the concerned authorities in response of the people affected by government measures, it appears decisions were taken without examining their overall impact.

The decision to operate special flight to transport stranded workers fully reflects that the policy makers forgot about their movement to different countries in the Middle East.

Now, the government has decided to operate special flights to five countries for carrying Bangladeshi overseas workers amid the lockdown imposed on April 14.

The total schedule flight ban to and from Bangladesh was to stem the spread of coronavirus. If that is so, how special flights can be allowed to operate? Is coronavirus no threat to special flights?

Does the concerned know that special flights are going to fleece poor expatriates more?

The return tickets or the booking that returning workers hold are not valid for special flights. They are to buy tickets for special flights at much higher prices than schedule flights. The concerned airline and travel agents are going to be benefited at the cost of the workers for no fault of theirs.

"Special flights will be arranged for the overseas workers who have got stuck in the country following the government's strict lockdown. Bangladeshi workers who work in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Qatar and Singapore can leave the country under the special arrangements," Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad told news agencies on April 14.

The minister did not mention about workers who are working in countries other than the five that he mentioned. The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) will formulate a work plan in this regard, Imran Ahmad said.

The five countries are still open for Bangladesh as there is no problem in those countries, he said.

Responding to another question, the minister said, "The recruiting agencies concerned are responsible for bringing the overseas workers with negative Covid-19 certificates to the airport and they'll have to follow health guidelines as well."

"The Bangladeshi expatriates can also return home only for emergency needs after collecting their release orders from Bangladesh missions and complying with quarantine conditions with Covid-19 negative certificates," said Imran.

Answering a query about how many workers have got stuck, the minister said, "It's difficult to say about the exact number but it might be 25000-30,000 as the recruiting agencies claim. The number may go up to 1 lakh when we'll launch the special flights."

President of the Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (ATAB) Mansur Ahmed said, "We've urged the government to take necessary steps to operate international flights to continue the travel of the expatriate workers and new visa holders. We made the demand at a press briefing on April 13."

The government suspended the operation of all domestic and international passenger flights to restrict the spread of coronavirus in the country.

"Many Bangladeshi expatriates, including workers, returned home on leave while many came to deal with emergency family affairs, and they're still there in Bangladesh. Following the government's [lockdown] decision, they've got stuck. Among them, the visas of many are going to expire soon, while many new visa-holders are eagerly waiting with air tickets to leave the country. If they fail to go back in time, then their visas might be cancelled by their employers," said the ATAB president.

He also urged the Prime Minister to resume the operation of international flights to some other countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, taking into account the situation of the expatriates.

On April 13, Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) held a press briefing urging the government to take effective measures to operate international

flights.

In a written statement, BAIRA said there is no impact of Covid-19 on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Middle East countries, and those countries even did not issue any ban on the travel of migrant workers. "So, the decision of the government is illogical. As a result, the workers and recruiting agencies are set to suffer huge financial losses."

The government has enforced a fresh strict lockdown across the country for eight days from April 14 in an effort to stop the spread of the deadly coronavirus.

Looking at the global situation, it can be said that total schedule flight ban is no solution—effective preventive measures followed by airlines of the different countries is the answer. Bangladesh can allow operation of limited schedule flights with strict compliance of protectable measures.