

US-Bangla eyeing to make Sylhet more accessible

Set to introduce three new routes from the northeastern city

MAHMUDUL HASAN

US-Bangla Airlines, the largest local private airline in terms of fleet size, plans to open new routes for Bangladesh's domestic travellers, especially to and from Sylhet.

From the middle of this year, the airline will begin flights on new routes: Sylhet-Chattoogram, Sylhet-Cox's Bazar, Jashore-Chattoogram and Jashore-Sylhet.

Currently, there are eight commercial airports in Bangladesh and each destination can only be reached through the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka.

"If the new routes are introduced, passengers will be able to travel between most airports without a transit at HSIA," said Sikder Mezbahuddin Ahmed, chief executive officer of US-Bangla Airlines, during a press conference at a hotel in Sylhet on Sunday.

As a part of their plans, the airline added a brand new 72-seater ATR72-600 aircraft to their fleet last week on a ten-year lease. The vessel is manufactured by ATR (Aerei da Trasporto Regionale), a joint venture by French aerospace company Airbus and Italian aviation group Aeritalia.

A group of journalists from Dhaka boarded the new aircraft, which carried them to the press conference in Sylhet in its maiden voyage.

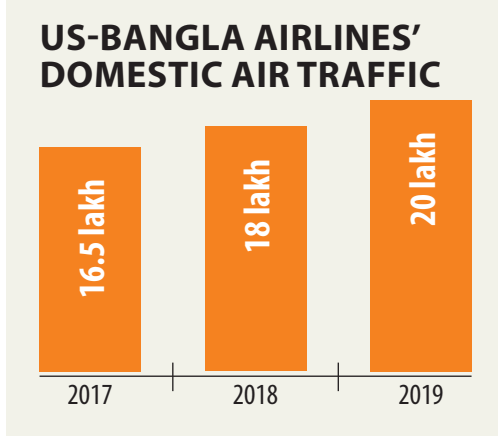
Four more aircraft of similar build will arrive within the next few months.

Launched in July 2014 with the motto 'Fly Fast, Fly Safe', US-Bangla is now trying to modernise its fleet with fifth generation airships.

The airline previously added five of ATR 72-600 aircraft to its fleet, featuring four Boeing 737-800 and three DASH8-Q400 planes. With the latest addition, US-Bangla's fleet size stands

AT A GLANCE

- Established in July 2014 by US-Bangla Group
- Initially operated with two Bombardier built DASH 8-Q400
- Now has a fleet of 13
 - four Boeing 737-800
 - Three DASH8-Q400
 - Six ATR72-600
- It made global headlines in 2018 when its plane crashed in Nepal killing 51
- Plans to buy four more ATR72-600 aircraft this year



at 13, the country's second largest overall after national flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

"Flying in the ATR72-600, which is equipped with a glass technology cockpit, passengers will now feel safer," Ahmed said.

A glass cockpit is an aircraft cockpit that features electronic (digital) flight instrument displays, typically large LCD screens, rather than the traditional analogue dials and gauges.

Ahmed touted the new aircraft as the best for short-haul destinations in Bangladesh. It has various advanced technologies, such as better air-conditioning and cabin pressurisation system. Its engine is also 6 per cent more powerful and more fuel efficient than its predecessor model, the ATR72-500, he said.

"The plane's most interesting feature is that it has a powerful engine but consumes 20 per cent

less fuel," Ahmed added.

To cope with the new technologies, the airline conducted pilot training programmes, led by experienced foreign instructors and pilots, according to US-Bangla officials.

"We are the biggest local private airline but this does not make us proud. What we are proud of is that we kept our promise to our valued customers by providing safe and comfortable flights with brand new aircrafts, featuring the best technologies," Ahmed said.

Asked about the possibility of operating flights on routes with less equipped airports, he said the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh has already taken the initiative to upgrade airports and all relevant infrastructure as needed.

The airline launches 26 flights to and from domestic locations such as Chattoogram, Cox's Bazar, Jashore, Saidpur, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Barishal and Dhaka each day.

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Graft, regulatory barriers stand in the way of UK investment

High commissioner says

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Uncertainty in regulatory regime and corruption choke the flow of British investment to Bangladesh, said Robert Chatterton Dickson, the UK envoy in Dhaka, yesterday.

A British firm had planned to invest a huge amount in Bangladesh, but it abandoned the plan due to corruption and judicial barriers here, he said.

Dickson was delivering a lecture on the "Importance of international trade" organised by the Department of International Business of Dhaka University in the business faculty's auditorium.

The high commissioner, however, did not disclose the name of the company.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) plays a vital role in upskilling a workforce, he said.

"Bangladesh has done remarkably well in the 50 years since its independence -- something the country can be genuinely proud of. But, to maintain that growth Bangladesh needs to know how FDI can provide more jobs and more capital."

The UK and Bangladesh still have a good trade relationship, and the UK will be developing new partnerships and building on historic friendships, he added. Dickson said he came to know from the British media's commentary during 1971 that the UK had been on the side of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has the fastest growing economy in the world and the UK is its largest single market and second largest source of international investment, he said.

Marks and Spencer, Unilever, HSBC and Standard Chartered are some of the British companies, which are doing well in Bangladesh, he said.



Robert Chatterton Dickson

There are now some 600,000 British citizens of Bangladeshi heritage in the UK, which include four members of the parliament, he added.

"On Brexit, the high commissioner said: "For the first time since 1973, we are a fully sovereign country and able to control our own destiny."

The British government will work with the EU to negotiate a free trade agreement by the year end along with drawing on other recent agreements, such as the ones between the EU and Canada, he said.

"That should be the core of our future relationship."

Bangladesh needs to boost its value chain and diversify its exports to maintain growth in the presence of such free trade deals, he said.

Among others, Shobod Deba Nath, chairman of the Department of International Business of Dhaka University, and Derek Griffiths, head of trade at the British high commission, attended the event along with around 200 students of the university.

More participatory and inclusive budget next year

NBR seeks budget proposals from think-tanks, lenders

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The revenue authority has sought proposals from a wide range of stakeholders, including ministries, think-tanks and international lenders, apart from trade bodies as it kick-starts its preparations to frame revenue measures for fiscal 2020-21.

"In the past we used to look for proposals from trade bodies only," said an official of the National Board of Revenue. This time, the revenue authority is reaching out to other stakeholders such as think-tanks, multilateral agencies and government bodies to make fiscal measures more participatory and inclusive.

The value-added tax wing of the NBR issued letters in this regard on Sunday.

The official believes the suggestions from the stakeholders will help them boost revenue collection as opposed to the proposals from trade bodies, who usually ask for waivers and discounts.

By February 27, opinions and recommendations will have to be submitted on VAT and Supplementary Duty Act 2012, the rules related to the law, Excises and Salt Act as well as notifications and orders related to the legislations.

The measures will increase revenue collection, ease the process of doing business and remove procedural complexities regarding revenue matters, according to the letters. "And budgetary exercise is part of that process," the official added.

The NBR logged more than 85 per cent of the total revenue of Tk 252,056 crore the state collected in fiscal 2018-19 to execute its annual expenditure plans.

VAT was the biggest source of revenue followed by income tax and import tariff, according to data from the finance ministry and the NBR.

Light engineering to help diversify export basket

Says Salman F Rahman, PM's private industry and investment adviser

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Over-reliance on garment industry is Bangladesh's main weakness, said Salman F Rahman, private industry and investment adviser to the prime minister.

"We have to diversify our export basket and products, in which light engineering sector will play a crucial role," he said yesterday at the inaugural ceremony of the two-day 'Light engineering trade fair' organised by Brac at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in Dhaka.

The public-private partnership is one of the reasons light engineering sector is flourishing in Bangladesh, he said.

The veteran businessman also lauded the gender-inclusive strategy of Brac and the steps the world's largest non-governmental organisation has taken to give a boost to the light engineering sector.

At the event, Manfred Fernholz, head of the food and nutrition security and sustainable development section of the European Union Delegation in Bangladesh, urged the government and the financial institutions to extend their support to the small engineering sector.

The contribution of the light engineering sector measures up to 2.2 per cent of Bangladesh's GDP, Fernholz said.

"Yet, the sector has been suffering from lack of tech and financial support, skills development, infrastructure, which in turn, makes the sector less competitive."



Centre, Salman F Rahman, private industry and investment adviser to the prime minister, attends the inaugural ceremony of the two-day 'Light engineering trade fair' organised by Brac at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in Dhaka yesterday.

Capital machinery has only 1 per cent import duty and no value-added tax, said Abdur Razzak, president of the Bangladesh Engineering Industry Owners Association.

"But 15 per cent VAT on local production of the same capital machinery has been imposed to be effective from July 1 this year. We want the VAT to be entirely lifted."

They spoke on the sidelines of the fair being held under Brac's 'Pro-poor growth of rural enterprises through sustainable skills-development' (PROGRESS) project funded by the European Union.

Some 58 businesses from 41 districts showcased their products at the showcase. The three-year PROGRESS project began

in February 2017 to support the growth of the country's light engineering sector by developing dynamic and competitive micro and cottage enterprises.

Diversification of light engineering sector depends on effective policy support, public-private partnerships, technical and business information, innovation and sustainable development of technology and related products, experts said at the inaugural ceremony. Capacity development of industries, research and development facilities and removal of other barriers are also needed to flourish the sector, they said.

"We, as an organisation, continue to focus on skills development in our 2020-2025 strategy as a committed development partner of the Bangladesh government," said Asif Saleh, chair of the event and executive director of Brac.

To effectively grow the skills development sector, Bangladesh must turn around its conventional perception about degree-based education and remove the stigma attached to vocational education, he further said.

Currently, 47 per cent of university graduates in Bangladesh are unemployed and the solution lies in skills-based education focusing on the contemporary and future market needs, he said.

"Bangladesh government is doing the right thing by prioritising the light engineering sector in the Mujib Barsha of 2020."

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CASHING IN ON CRICKET MANIA

Cottage industry making amateur bats rakes in Tk 15cr a year

HABIBUR RAHMAN, from Pirojpur

Cricket is close to religion in the Indian subcontinent, it is often said.

Bangladesh was late to the party, but thanks to the exploits of Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mashrafe bin Mortaza over the past decade the fervour for the game is reaching the same levels as its neighbours.

When love for the sport began to spread countrywide, a carpenter from a remote village in Pirojpur's Nesarabad upazila cashed in on the fervour. Abdul Latif Bepary, who passed away in 2012, was said to be the country's first carpenter to produce locally made cricket bats.

Born at Uribuniya village on the bank of river Belua, Bepary travelled to Dhaka for work in the 1980s. There, he was introduced to Sirajul Islam Khan, owner of the Khelarsathi sports shop in the capital's Gulistan area.

Under Khelarsathi's employment, Bepary made assorted sporting goods, mainly wooden awards, with great skill.

"One day, the shop owner called in Bepary and showed him some cricket bats imported from Pakistan. He asked if he could replicate it," said Abul Kalam, 59, a relative of Bepary, who owns a cricket bat factory at Binna village in the upazila.

What transpired next was the birth of the country's first cricket bat, according to Kalam.

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HABIBUR RAHMAN

Nesarabad upazila in Pirojpur is said to be the birthplace of local cricket bat manufacturing companies. Here, non-international standard bats for casual use are made in the thousands each year. From sculpting the wood to burnishing and packaging finished products, some 200 factories laced all over the area have been producing cricket bats since 1997.