

Biman in bad shape

17 flights rescheduled till Monday as 3 out of 5 DC-10s inoperative

REAZ AHMAD

Flight schedules of the national flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines have completely fallen apart largely because of flights to too many destinations with too small a fleet.

In a latest development last night, Biman announced rescheduling of as many as 17 flights until Monday causing delays ranging from two hours to two days.

Out of its five DC-10s, one has been lying idle in a hanger for over six months because of engine damage, one was sent to the hanger for maintenance on Tuesday, one was grounded in Brussels on Wednesday, and yet another one collided with flying birds in Kuwait on Thursday.

The national flag carrier has earned the reputation of a 'poor

schedule manager' by operating flights to as many as 29 international and six domestic destinations with a dwindling fleet of only 13 aircraft -- five wide-bodied DC10-30s having 274 seats each, four Airbus A-310-300s with 220 seats each and four F-28s having 80 seats each.

Officials concerned confirmed that with a small fleet of aging aircraft, Biman is losing its nerve in carrying the nation's flag to eight South Asian destinations, six South-East and Far-Eastern destinations, nine destinations in the Gulf and Middle-Eastern regions and six European and North American points.

Biman is now being able to maintain its flight schedules in only 17 percent cases compared to the international-standard rate of 90 percent.

Amid such a management breakdown, Biman's New York flight was grounded in Brussels twice within a span of only 16 days. In the first instance, Biman's Dhaka-NY flight with 237 passengers on board was grounded in Brussels on January 29. Later a replacement engine was made available from Amsterdam and nine engineers from Dhaka went there to repair the DC-10.

The same DC-10 was grounded in Brussels again on Wednesday night for problems in its fuel line. Biman officials in Dhaka confirmed last night that 150 passengers, who were stranded in Brussels for two days, were sent to New York through other airlines while engineers from Dhaka left for Brussels last night to repair the craft.

It was the third time in five months that the national airlines'

loss-incurring NY flight faced such troubles.

In late September last year, a Biman flight on this route was forced to remain stranded at John F Kennedy Airport in New York for three days as the US Federal Aviation Authorities (FAA) did not let the aircraft take off without repairing at least 17 mechanical faults it had detected.

Biman's DC-10 on Bahrain-Kuwait-Dhaka route was hit by flying birds in Kuwait on Thursday causing some damages in its nose. It had a troubled landing in Kuwait but was expected to come back home safely after necessary repairs last night.

Biman sent another DC-10 for D-check on Tuesday last and it is unlikely to leave the hanger and rejoin the fleet before 45 days.

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Train services on 8 routes resume

UNB, Ctg

Train services on eight loss-incurring routes of Bangladesh Railway's eastern zone, suspended on Thursday amid persisting fuel crisis in the country, resumed yesterday afternoon.

The decision to resume the train services was taken at an urgent meeting of Bangladesh Railway here yesterday, following an assurance by the communications ministry to allocate necessary fund for purchase of fuel, said Kazi Asadullah, chief traffic manager of the eastern zone.

The authorities on Thursday suspended train services on Dhaka-Mymensingh, Dhaka-Bhairab, Mymensingh-Bahadurabad, Chittagong-Akhaura, Mymensingh-Jariganj, Sylhet-Chhatak Bazar, Laksam-Noakhali and Chandpur-Laksam routes for an indefinite period as an austerity

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Addiction grips women more and more

PINAKI ROY

Sushama (not her real name), who had once tried to make her husband quit drugs, herself took on the vice after the birth of their daughter. From frustration, anger and desperation, she started drinking Phensedyl.

"Initially, my husband would offer me Phensedyl to make me addicted. I didn't realise his real intention was to eventually use me for earning money. Even our daughter couldn't sway his mind," said Sushama, now an inmate of a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts in the city.

"At one point, I was forced to divorce him. But, by that time, I had become completely dependent on Phensedyl," she said, adding she later shifted to heroin as it was less expensive.

"In my 14 years of addiction life, I committed many sins to get money for drug. Now I want to get rid of it," said Sushama.

Women like Sushama are not that uncommon in the society. The number of female drug users is



actually on the rise, said sources at the few rehab centres in the city that offer treatment to women, adding they are now getting more female patients than ever before.

Not only the lower-class, the problem has spread to all socio-economic classes and only a small portion of the female drug addicts winds up at the rehab centres,

sources said.

"Many of our female patients come from the upper class, mostly students of English-medium schools and private universities," said retired Col M Mahbubur Rahman, director of Pratyoi, a renowned rehab centre of the city. He said most of the women addicts are aged between 16 and 30 years.

"Most of them are Yaba and heroin addicts. The girls acquire the habit from their male classmates and buy the drugs with their help," Mahbub said.

Sources said a significant number of girls studying at public universities and colleges also abuse and become addicted to drugs.

A teacher at the city's Scholastica School verified the rising frequency of drug abuse among his students. "I've noticed it among many of the girls in our school. But, it's very hard to control. I've heard some students even sell drugs to their fellows," he said requesting anonymity.

"It's not possible to say anything statistically. But it's true the

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A fuel station staff at Kansat says sorry to fuel-hungry farmers who took the trouble to bring recommendation letters from their union parishad chairmen, left, a dejected farmer walks on his dried up field for boro cultivation in Godagari upazila of Rajshahi district yesterday.



PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Flexibility to better caretaker system

Says McKinnon; hails AL's return to parliament

UNB, Dhaka

Commonwealth Secretary-General Donald McKinnon yesterday said the caretaker government system could be improved with people's consent and democracy should have that level of flexibility in the greater interest of the nation.

McKinnon's statement came at an extempore press briefing at Zia International Airport before his departure for Islamabad ending a two-day visit to Bangladesh. When asked for his comments on the main opposition's proposals placed in parliament for improving the caretaker government system, he said, "I think every system can

be improved."

He expressed happiness at the main opposition's return to parliament and said, "They [Awami League lawmakers] can get maximum attention from parliament, where they can address the issues they want."

Describing the non-party caretaker government system as 'fascinating and productive' that plays a role at a particular time, the chief executive of the confederation of former British colonies said he would consider if similar system could be introduced in other countries too.

Asked if the Commonwealth

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FUEL, POWER CRISES PERSIST

Vast areas in the north to miss boro cultivation

HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU, from Chapainawabganj

Boro crops in the north are wilting fast while thousands of hectares of land remain uncultivated due to lack of irrigation caused by the ongoing fuel and power crises.

Visiting the northern districts of Bogra, Gaibandha, Dinajpur, Joypurhat, Noagaon, Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj, this correspondent found many farmlands were yet to be ploughed. The boro harvest this year will suffer a severe downturn, if these plots are not ploughed within the next few days, farmers said.

As of February 13, farmers could not prepare 14,000 hectares of boro land in Kurigram district against

the 71,000-hectare target for this year, said a Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) official of Kurigram.

Farmers abstained from ploughing the plots, as they were not sure whether they would be able to water them and as they watched young rice plants dying from lack of irrigation, he added.

A farmer of Pratappur village under Kurigram Sadar upazila, Jyoti Ahammad, said many of the young boro plants in his lands have died from lack of water, adding, "More plants will die if the situation does not improve soon."

Agriculturists at a DAE meeting last week also predicted a harvest shortfall of boro this year. The DAE officials from the northern districts

also expressed the fear that hundreds of hectares of fertile boro lands would remain barren if the power and diesel crises were not addressed immediately.

The farmers in Kurigram switched to diesel-run irrigation pumps after hundreds of electric pumps had become useless for lack of power supply. According to the DAE officials' estimate, at least 1,700 diesel-pumps were installed in the district as alternatives to electric pumps.

Bangladesh Power Development Board officials said the daily average supply of power in the northern region now stands at 225 MW, almost half of the 450 MW demand. The supply shortfall aggravated

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Tongi power plant trips

UNB, Dhaka

The 80-megawatt Tongi power plant was temporarily shut down on Thursday due to shortage of air-filters.

Power Development Board (PDB) officials said the air-filters used in the plant were exhausted ahead of the schedule, leading to the closure of the plant.

They feared the closure will add to the ongoing power crisis in and around the city, particularly in Tongi Industrial Area.

According to PDB sources, the peaking plant had been facing various problems since its installation last year by the China-based Harbin Power Engineering.

Soon after its inauguration by the prime minister in September last year, the plant abruptly stopped functioning. However, when the plant resumed generation, it again faced problem in gas supply.

At one stage, the plant remained closed for a number of days because of "low pressure in gas supply line."

For the last few months, the

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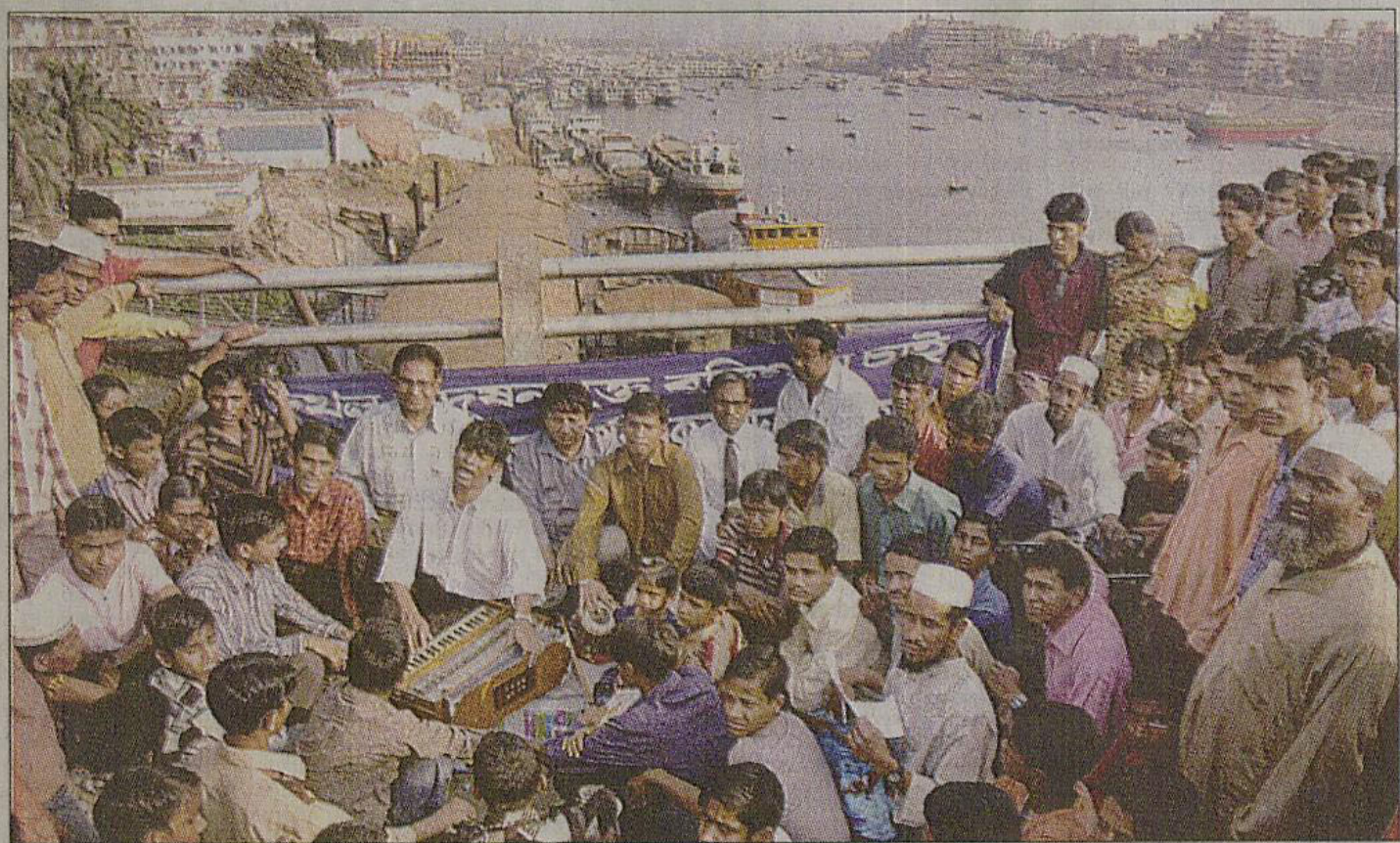


PHOTO: STAR

Save the Environment Movement campaigns with songs on the Second Buriganga Bridge yesterday to press home the demand for early implementation of the taskforce decision and to create awareness for keeping the river pollution free.

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