

Biman’s Airbus plan set to backfire

Why expand cargo-carrying capacity without first utilising existing planes?

We fail to understand the logic behind Biman’s decision – not for the first time – to approve in principle the purchase of 10 Airbus planes, including two freighters. Last year, Biman managed to carry just over 28,000 tonnes of freight in the cargo hold of planes making international flights when it had the capacity to transport over 4.98 lakh tonnes, meaning that 94 percent of its freight-carrying capacity remained unutilised. Moreover, as an audit by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) shows, Biman carried 20.58 lakh passengers on international flights with around 7 lakh seats left vacant.

Between 2011 and 2019, Biman bought 12 Boeing planes spending around Tk 19,000 crore. But evidently, those haven’t been properly utilised, largely due to shortages of pilots and cabin crew members as well as its poor planning and management. This newspaper has also published multiple reports showing the disastrous state of pilot recruitment and training at Biman. Its incompetence has already put passengers’ lives at risk on more than one occasion, and embarrassed the nation as a whole. Why is it, then, that instead of fixing these problems and ensuring proper utilisation of existing planes, Biman is focusing on purchasing more of them? Has Biman carried out any research to see whether the decision to ferry cargo in additional freighters will increase profits, and not result in greater losses the burden of which will eventually be shifted onto taxpayers?

Experts have suggested that the decision is not an economically viable one. Airfreight is a seasonal business in Bangladesh, which means that for five to six months, there is very little demand. That is why even foreign carriers operate in Bangladesh only when demand is high during the peak season. On top of that, most outbound freight goes to the West, and the items Bangladesh imports largely come from China, Hong Kong and Japan. So, the inbound cargo flights from the West and the outbound flights to the East would be virtually empty. As there is little or no inbound demand for cargo to Dhaka from the West, foreign carriers first fly to Bangkok or Singapore carrying goods and then make a stopover in Dhaka during the return flight to pick up freight that they deliver to the West. But Biman has made no such strategic plan.

Another thing Biman needs to do should it purchase the Airbus planes is train its cockpit, cabin crew members and engineers afresh to deal with the new aircraft. Again, we wonder how well Biman is positioned to do so with the existing problems it has.

We believe Biman’s decision is a rash and overambitious one. There are plenty of things it needs to focus on first – starting with addressing systemic problems including corruption, nepotism and mismanagement – before it can expand to the height it seems to be aspiring to. Of course, we definitely want our national flag carrier to elevate itself to such a position. But that has to begin by addressing Biman’s internal issues, so that its efficiency can reach a level that justifies such an expansion.

Gold smugglers must be stopped

Innovative methods being used to carry gold deserve appropriate response from officials

It is concerning to know how crime, especially transnational organised crime, is getting harder to tackle because of technology, legal and systemic loopholes as well as innovative methods. As per a new report, transnational gangs are bringing gold bars into Bangladesh through legal means before smuggling those to India. These racketeers apparently approach people travelling to Bangladesh from the Middle East and Singapore, and give them gold bars weighing about 234 grams, the maximum that a traveller can carry under the Baggage Rules, 2016. Once the carriers arrive, syndicate members in Bangladesh receive the bars and smuggle them to India. In return, the carriers are compensated monetarily and/or have their flight fare paid. Some people that our correspondent spoke to actually view this as a profession, as they can get up to Tk 30,000 from each trip.

This is just one example of how transnational crimes are being committed using innovative methods. Gold smuggling, in particular, has been the subject of many such experiments. It’s also one of the most reported instances of smuggling. We have almost regularly come across reports of people being caught with gold bars and bullions at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka or other airports in the country. Worryingly, sometimes such crimes happen with the help of responsible officials. One may recall that earlier last year, a Dhaka court sentenced two employees of Biman to 12 years in jail for their involvement in smuggling over 9kg of gold. The role played by the relevant authorities in handling smuggling cases also leaves a lot to be desired. In 2022, for example, after analysing 17 cases of gold smuggling spanning 2016-2020, the CID found evidence of police negligence in collecting necessary information from the accused. This is one of the reasons why often only the carriers are arrested, while those behind the smuggling rings remain unidentified and comfortably outside the law.

It is more or less known by now that Bangladesh is being used as a transit hub by many transnational smuggling and trafficking gangs because of its lax enforcement of the law and the oft-flexible nature of those in charge, the Dhaka airport being a case in point. Unfortunately, while these criminals are using ingenious methods and loopholes in the system to their advantage, our law enforcers seem to be failing to catch up to them. It is, therefore, vital that state officials remain cautious and proactive at all times if we are to reduce such crimes.

Since smuggling of gold involves a few other countries besides Bangladesh, coordination among local and regional authorities is also crucial to stop the flow of gold. For that, we urge the government to regularly engage with our regional partners. They all must coordinate and collaborate with each other because such crimes, the consequences of which are far-reaching, affect them all.

Is a policy directive enough to stop school bullying?



Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University, chair of Bangladesh ECD Network, and vice-chair of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). Views expressed in this article are the author’s own.

MANZOOR AHMED

The Ministry of Education has issued the “Policy for the Prevention of Bullying and Ragging in Educational Institutions, 2023” to prevent bullying in educational institutions and punish the perpetrators around Bangladesh. But how far can a central directive go in achieving the results? What else should be done?

Bullying among peers is a common antisocial behaviour among children and adolescents in most cultures. When this happens in a school setting, supposedly a safe and stimulating environment where children would learn, thrive and flourish, this is unacceptable. Yet, this is far too common a situation.

School bullying of a student takes many forms: corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure; physical violence; verbal humiliation; gender-based violence; and abuse prompted by personal attributes such as disabilities, and any other distinguishing features such as physical appearance, ethnicity, language or socioeconomic background. The perpetrators are not just the peers, but sometimes teachers, administrators, and school staff.

A Unicef survey in Bangladesh in 2019 indicated that a quarter of the children of 10-17 years of age have been victims of bullying. This is likely to be a large underestimate. The prevalence and impact of bullying are difficult to quantify because of its interpersonal nature, the diverse ways in which it is manifested, not often overt, and the immediate and longer-term effects that are not easy to detect.

The problem is not new; it has been the subject of public debate, received media attention, and even attracted judicial interventions. There have also been regulations and directives issued by the education authorities regarding physical violence and verbal abuse of students by teachers. In a way, it is surprising that a policy now has been issued regarding this long-standing and pervasive phenomenon. The question is if and how the new directive can make a difference.

Over two decades ago, the Education Policy, 2010 recognised the problem and provided some guidelines as solutions. For example, it suggested initiating student welfare and counselling services at all educational levels, with designated teachers to be trained to deliver counselling (Chapter 22). A working committee would also be formed with teachers, guardians, students and



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

community representatives to improve the (learning and physical) environment in each school at primary and secondary levels. For higher education institutions, action plans will be prepared to take effective measures (Chapter 22). It also suggested that codes of conduct be adopted for teachers and learners at all levels of education, a purpose of which would be to ensure that students “do not face any physical or mental tortures” (Chapter 28).

The authorities have not taken the necessary steps to implement these policy recommendations. The most egregious incidents that drew public and media attention prompted judicial intervention. On October 7, 2019, Abrar Fahad, a student of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), was beaten to death by the activists of the student wing of the ruling party (BCL) for allegedly making a post on Facebook that was critical of the government. The High Court then directed the government to form within three months anti-bullying committees at all educational institutions, especially universities and colleges. No systematic action followed this court ruling.

On August 21, 2021, the High Court bench issued a ruling asking the authorities concerned to explain

their inaction in stopping bullying at educational institutions. Then, on February 16 this year, the High Court sounded alarm about the physical torture of a female student of the Islamic University in Kushtia allegedly by a group of BCL members. The current policy directive appears to be a belated and hesitant response to the judicial observations and public concern.

young people to antisocial behaviour and picking on those who seem to be different or weak. This situation is commonly evident at the primary and secondary school levels. The educational experience of students in the classroom and outside, and the extracurricular activities need to recognise this reality. Teachers, parents, and school administrators have to be alert to the

Looking at the pattern of bullying and transgressions of student safety and rights at different levels of education, a pattern can be observed. At the tertiary level, it is the ruling regime-supported student organisations that are involved in various illegal activities and in exercising control over the general student bodies. Bullying and violence in these circumstances can be restrained only by a political decision to cut loose the ties of political protection and patronage to the student wings and make them subject to the normal academic code of conduct.

There is a gender and sexual dimension to bullying, ragging and intimidation, which cuts across the types and levels of institutions. Girl students are especially vulnerable in the prevailing patriarchal norms and values in society. Mindset, customs and habits of teachers, institutional managers, students – both boys and girls – and families of students are complicit, directly or indirectly, in creating and maintaining the environment that makes girls vulnerable.

There is the common behaviour pattern and psychology of children and adolescents, often characterised by jealousy, rivalry, selfishness, insecurity and a lack of self-esteem, that lead

situation and need to examine their own attitudes and values in this respect. The school experience should also nurture among learners empathy, appreciation of diversity, and respect for differences.

It is in the sphere of children and teenage behaviour patterns and the need for guidance, counselling, support, and learning the norms of social interaction as children grow up that the policy guidance and various measures proposed are likely to be particularly relevant. In respect of the politics-generated misconduct at the tertiary institutions, and the gender-related vulnerability of girl students, the policy directives can be of help only to the extent that these are supported by policy shift and mindset change beyond the school premises, particularly at the higher tiers of political decision-making.

The social and cultural conditions that have fostered the environment for bullying and the values that allow tolerance of such behaviour are alive and well. So is the political culture that has prevented the efforts to change the conditions. The key actors have to recognise these obstacles and find ways to work around them to implement the policy.

EUROPE DAY

Building Europe as a strong global partner



HE Charles Whiteley is ambassador/head of delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh.

CHARLES WHITELEY

Every May 9, Europe Day is celebrated around the world. With 27 member states and 450 million EU citizens, Europe Day is a moment to reflect on how far the bloc has advanced both its own internal integration and its collective engagement with the wider world.

The EU is in essence a peace project. It was born in the aftermath of the Second World War and was designed from its inception to make a repeat of that disaster not only unthinkable, but also impossible.

The genesis of today’s EU was the Schuman Declaration, presented by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman on May 9, 1950. It proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community, whose members would pool coal and steel production – the drivers of war.

In the ensuing decades, the six-member European Coal and Steel Community morphed into the European Economic Community, succeeded by the European Community and finally by today’s European Union in 1993.

The construction of the European

project has witnessed the progressive expansion of membership. Any European state is eligible to join the EU and must fulfil a range of political and economic conditions to become a member. There are now eight “candidate” countries engaged in the accession process, with Ukraine joining that group in June 2022.

The progressive integration of EU member states has many facets: from the launch of the EU Single Market with free movement of goods, services, people and capital in January 1993 and the advent of the euro in 1999, to the expansion of collaboration on security and defence issues and the creation of a European diplomatic service.

Isolationism and protectionism have never been a part of the EU’s agenda. The EU recognises its responsibilities to the wider world, exemplified by the fact that it is the largest global provider of development and humanitarian assistance. In the space of 20 years, the EU has deployed 37 civilian-military missions overseas, with a diverse range of tasks, including support to the Palestinian police force to rescuing

migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. Over 140 EU representations abroad – including the EU Delegation here in Bangladesh – pursue trade, political, development, and humanitarian ties with host countries.

The EU has trade agreements with over 70 countries and has the most generous trade regime in the world, including duty-free and quota-free access to its market for all Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The EU is committed to working with Bangladesh to ensure a smooth transition to GSP+, which entails the implementation of 32 international conventions on environmental, social and human rights concerns in order to retain optimal access to the EU market.

The EU is using its political and economic weight to shape its response to global challenges.

The existential threat posed by climate change has galvanised EU action. The European Climate Law writes into law the goal set out in the European Green Deal for Europe’s economy and society to become climate-neutral by 2050. The law also sets the intermediate target of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030, compared to the 1990 levels. As the largest provider of climate finance – 23 billion euros in 2021 – the EU recognises its responsibilities to countries that need international support in tackling the consequences of climate change.

A major new worldwide EU initiative – Global Gateway – has been launched to provide, in the words of European

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, “a new strategic approach to investment.” Global Gateway is mobilising billions in values-driven support to infrastructure around the world. Here in Bangladesh, substantial funding is in the pipeline to assist the development of renewable energy.

The EU is a bloc that is rooted in the shared values of human rights and democracy. The European Court of Justice and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency help to ensure that the rights of EU citizens are protected by their national governments. All the EU’s bilateral agreements with partner countries include a joint commitment to these values. The EU also supports human rights actors around the world, including civil society.

The spectre of war on the European continent is now a reality again in the form of the Russian aggression in Ukraine that has killed thousands and displaced millions. This is a threat not only to peace in Europe but also to world peace and prosperity. It is also a violation of the UN Charter and Ukraine’s territorial integrity. As a direct neighbour of Ukraine, the EU and its member states are supporting the Ukrainian people in this darkest hour.

As we mark Europe Day here in Dhaka – as well as the half-century anniversary of Bangladesh-EU relations – it is a moment to reflect on the progress that the European Union has made in the 73 years since the Schuman Declaration, as well as the challenges that undoubtedly remain.