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What's driving Biman to buy Airbus planes?

Clearly, it's not based on financial viability

Biman's sudden U-turn on whether buying two Airbus A350 planes would be profitable or not seems to be driven by factors other than financial viability. In January, after studying the proposal for six months, the airliner concluded that it would be making massive losses—amounting to an accumulated cash shortfall of up to \$463.08 million over 25 years—if it bought the planes. Strangely enough, on April 22, a new appraisal committee took over the evaluation and, in only three days, decided that it would be a profitable venture. To come to this conclusion, the second committee seems to have invented all sorts of unrealistic scenarios, as per a report in this daily.

For example, the committee based its calculations on Biman filling 92 percent of seats on average (which it has never been able to achieve), showing an increased revenue of 20 percent compared to the evaluation of the previous committee. But even then, the second committee could only show the Airbus planes to be profitable on two routes. One of those routes is Dhaka to JFK Airport in New York, which Bangladesh carriers have not been able to serve since the US Federal Aviation Authority placed the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) in its Category 2, after finding irregularities in its operational activities in 2006. With that being the case, why would the committee even consider taking this route into its calculations? Another reasoning concocted by the committee is that jet fuel cost—which has historically been volatile, and has risen in recent times—would decrease, adding about a quarter of the increased revenue shown.

There are other glaring illogical assumptions at play here. The committee ignored the very costly spare parts that Biman would have to acquire for the Airbuses, the significant rise in expenditure as a result of operating a mixed fleet, as opposed to a Boeing-based fleet, etc. But even the committee had to admit that all this may require a huge overhaul of its current crew and their responsibilities, and that Biman may have to suspend operations in different routes or reduce frequency in different sectors. As such, why is the carrier still trying to push through with the Airbus purchases? Given Biman's coloured past—of defying operation rules and standards, violating procurement rules, scandals and anomalies in staff hiring, etc.—its motive needs to be investigated.

One may recall that on May 5 last year, a joint communique was signed by Lord Dominic Johnson, the UK minister of state in the department for business and trade, and Salman F Rahman, private industry and investment adviser to Bangladesh prime minister, regarding the purchase of eight Airbus A350s and two freighters. But this happened even before Biman carried out a viability study on such a purchase and the first techno-financial committee was formed. So, is Biman's decision being driven by political factors? That must not be the case considering the financial burden it would put on citizens. Biman's Airbus decision must be reevaluated in terms of its economic viability.

Managing dengue hotspots is crucial

Survey finds high density of Aedes larvae in 41 Dhaka wards

After 2023, which turned out to be the deadliest year on record in terms of dengue in Bangladesh, there was a feeling that things couldn't get any worse, that we had hit rock bottom. But barely five months into 2024, that feeling is beginning to evaporate as rock bottom appears to be still some distance away. By May 28, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), 2,795 dengue patients were hospitalised and 35 died in the country, compared to 13 deaths in the same period last year. This points to a potential repeat—or more likely an exacerbation—of the 2023 outbreak, which had claimed 1,705 lives.

Further fuelling this assumption is a recent survey by the DGHS that revealed a disturbing increase in the presence of Aedes mosquito larvae in Dhaka, where most of the infections and fatalities are usually recorded. According to the survey, a high density of Aedes larvae has been found in 29 wards of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and 12 wards of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC). It means that residents in 41 out of the 99 wards surveyed are at high risk, a number that will rise as the monsoon approaches. And if dengue data is collected from both government and private hospitals this year—as the DGHS said it would—year-end figures would no doubt shoot through the roof.

All this certainly makes for depressing reading. However, the authorities have so far shown no sense of urgency that the situation demands. Early efforts to destroy mosquito breeding grounds have been lacklustre, haphazard, and unmotivated. There has even been a misguided sense of complacency as displayed by the DSCC mayor who, against evidence, claimed "success" in their fight against dengue last year. Moreover, the government is yet to form a comprehensive, scientifically driven response plan befitting a disease that now poses a threat round the year. It is yet to introduce an integrated vector management system to enable proper interventions.

Clearly, we need an urgent course correction. A large part of the fight against dengue is preventing the breeding of Aedes mosquito, and the government must double down on this going forward. Experts have suggested hotspot management across the country, focusing on the addresses of dengue patients. This will require proper collaboration among the relevant agencies including DGHS and city corporations.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Joan of Arc burnt at the stake

On this day in 1431, having led the French army in a momentous victory over England at Orléans during the Hundred Years' War, Joan of Arc was charged with heresy and witchcraft and was burnt at the stake.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Citizens must use RTI Act to its full potential

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Bangladesh's adoption of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2009 was a transformative move, empowering its citizens to access information available to most public authorities on matters related to their work. It was a significant step towards making public authorities more transparent and accountable to the people. The Information Commission (IC) was constituted in 2009 to ensure the law's effective implementation. The commission is mandated to publish an annual report, giving a detailed account of its work and the performance of the demand side (citizens seeking information) and the

fruits only. Unless we move up to the upper level, the true benefits of the RTI law will not be fully achieved.

RTI experts have identified three different levels of the use of the law. The first level seeks information on public services and personal/neighbourhood needs. The second level seeks information to establish accountability of public officials. The third level seeks information to promote transparency at the national level and bring systemic change in governance. Over the past 14 years since the law came into force in Bangladesh, little progress has been made beyond the first level, though a shift to the second level is visible.

Until we reach the third level, we shall not realise the true benefit of the law. To achieve that end, there is a clear need for more educated and socially aware citizens to use the law. They can focus on more critical issues of governance affecting society and people as a whole. These would include allocation of budgets,

and interests, seeking mainstream issues of transparency and the rule of law to benefit society.

Such a matter-of-fact disposal of complaints, often from ordinary citizens, for simple mistakes or errors in the process, will likely discourage them and others from using the law further and thus deprive the government of benefiting from their willingness to use it to promote its objectives. We urge the IC to be more accommodating of the shortcomings in their applications. An Indian court ruled that using a simple postcard without a form is good enough to submit an RTI request. This could be a more empathetic approach towards citizens trying to navigate the complexities of the law.

The statistics provided in the annual reports show that the number of RTI applications has remained stagnant over the years. When the RTI Act came into force, nearly 20,000 applications were made annually in the first few years, but then the numbers dwindled progressively to an average of around 8,000 requests annually. We need to understand why. Is it still because of a lack of awareness about the law, fear of public authorities and their misbehaviour, or a fear of consequences for seeking sensitive information? In the latter regard, we are encouraged by the statements of the new information minister.

It is also essential to know what other mechanisms the IC uses to ensure that more and more people use the law, other than holding various awareness programmes up to the upazila level. If their efforts do not

and interests, seeking mainstream issues of transparency and the rule of law to benefit society.

More than the IC and the government, civil society and citizen groups must take the lead to ensure that RTI requests focus on the decision-making processes and procedures of governance rather than on the information, per se. To illustrate, at the local level, a person may initially want to see a list of those receiving safety net benefits to verify their exclusion (personal benefits/services). However, in the next stage, they may ask about the policy mandate of the concerned institution and gradually proceed to ask whether it is responsive to the public good or interest (i.e. accountability). Further, they may want to see the files in which such decisions were made, the names of the persons responsible, and the criteria by which they were selected (i.e. transparency).

In a nutshell, here are some points to ponder upon:

1. More than 14 years have passed since the RTI Act was adopted in Bangladesh, but the number of RTI applicants has remained stagnant at a comparatively very low level. As it is primarily a people's law, citizens' groups must collectively undertake responsibility to promote its use.

2. Public authorities still resist providing information on sensitive matters, sometimes even innocuous ones. The IC needs to pay particular attention to the matter.

3. While the IC appears to have recognised the problem caused by recalcitrant public officials, there is a scope for it to be more proactive. A clear and consistent display of its

Citizens are now embracing it as a collective duty to promote good governance. This positive development signifies that the true spirit and objective of the RTI law are gradually being realised. However, its use is still limited to what we may call focusing on low-hanging fruits only. Unless we move up to the upper level, the true benefits of the RTI law will not be fully achieved.

supply side (public authorities who supply them).

The recent release of the 2023 Annual Report by the Information Commission has sparked a significant surge in interest, with national dailies, civil society and NGOs all actively discussing its findings. This heightened attention is a promising indication, reflecting a growing recognition of the law's potential benefits. However, it also underscores the crucial role of each stakeholder in fully harnessing this potential. Each of us, as stakeholders, plays a vital part in this journey towards transparency and accountability, and our active engagement is key to its success.

The IC's role in promoting the RTI law is of utmost importance. Its primary duty is to advocate for the widespread adoption and understanding of the law. Additionally, the IC is entrusted with the task of adjudicating disputes between the demand and supply sides. This crucial function is fulfilled through regular hearings to resolve complaint cases. Recently, the commission has been focusing on how government officials handle citizens' RTI requests, a key aspect of the RTI process that ensures the law's effective implementation.

The IC's annual report this year unveils a promising trend. In the past, citizens viewed the use of RTI as an individual right to be exercised as and when necessary. However, a significant shift has been observed in recent years. Citizens are now embracing it as a collective duty to promote good governance. This positive development signifies that the true spirit and objective of the RTI law are gradually being realised. However, its use is still limited to what we may call focusing on low-hanging

information on public funding, spending on government projects, etc. In neighbouring India, for example, activists filed RTI requests that led to the recent unearthing of a public scandal relating to electoral bonds. It is not logical to expect ordinary citizens to understand the intricacies of such critical issues for the nation.

Bangladesh thus needs to create an environment where civil society leaders, activists, and ordinary citizens feel encouraged to use the law. This will be possible when public authorities are prepared to deal with all kinds of RTI applications, including matters they may consider sensitive. That preparedness is still not there.

We appreciate the recent position that the Information Commission took on the role of government officials in applying the law and its decisions to make them respect its provisions. However, some factors remain bothersome. A close look at statistics from recent years on the rejection of complaints by the IC shows that in 2023, among 686 complaints filed with it, the IC accepted 324 for a hearing (47.23 percent). In 2022, from 791 complaints filed, it accepted 360 for a hearing (45.51 percent). In 2021, 463 complaints were filed and 234 accepted for a hearing (50.53 percent). Overall, around 50 percent of complaints are accepted for a hearing.

That means approximately 50 percent of the complaints received are rejected by the IC and disposed of without a hearing, often simply with some advice on corrective measures. The grounds for rejection are often simple errors or omissions in fulfilling the processes of the law, such as not attaching a copy of the original application with the complaint or not

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work, what will happen if NGOs, too, fail to promote the law because of a lack of funds? It should be a matter of concern.

As NGO workers involved in promoting the law, we know that many RTI applications submitted annually to different public offices are made through the efforts of many NGOs in the field. We see its benefits as many applicants have emerged as activists. They have developed a clear understanding of the law and realised that keeping an eye on the affairs of the government through seeking information is more a duty than a right. It is mainly through the efforts of many RTI activists that the process of approaching government officials to pursue redress has been demystified. However, it is imperative to scale this intervention to more groups across Bangladesh to foster a people-friendly culture in all public offices. The RTI law aims to direct efforts beyond individual grievances

resolve that those who disobey the law will be dealt with firmly will help. We see an improvement over the years in the number of Designated Officials (DOs) being sanctioned for non-fulfilment of their duties, but they are still few and far between. Between 2011 and 2023, the IC heard 3,233 complaint cases and penalised only 81 DOs to pay compensation or fine or face department actions, which appears relatively low.

We call upon all relevant stakeholders, including the Information Commission, information ministry and civil society to work together to create an enabling atmosphere for people to use the RTI law to achieve its objectives meaningfully. We must understand that the use of RTI law is not merely to focus on the work of the government, but rather to operationalise good governance and inclusive development in the country through citizen participation.