



FLY HIGH

How helicopters took Dhaka's denizens to the skies

SUKANTA HALDER

AK Azad, chairman and chief executive officer of Ha-Meem Group and a member of parliament from Faridpur-3 constituency, used to visit his factories in his car once or twice a month around a year ago.

However, he now travels chartering a helicopter, enabling him to visit up to five factories in a single day.

"Due to traffic congestion and poor road conditions, I can only visit one factory a day if I travel by car. But with a helicopter, I can visit five factories a day. So, I use the helicopter more frequently now," he said.

Azad begins his journey from Dhaka at 8:30am, first visiting his factory in Kaliganj, then to a Maona factory, followed by a factory in Mirzapur. Afterwards, he travels to Ashulia, and finally to a factory in Tongi.

The entrepreneur started his business in 1984 with a small factory in Dhaka's Motijheel, equipped with 57 machines, after graduating from the University of Dhaka.

Now, Ha-Meem Group, one of the top textile and garment manufacturers in Bangladesh, has 39 business concerns in various sectors, mainly textile, garment, media and tea.

Azad said the head office staff often undermine those who work at the factory level, creating a gap between the two. He believes that factory visits allow for quick problem solving.

"Sometimes there are issues in maintenance and production, and by visiting the factory, I can easily identify the problem and solve it," he said.

"Many times, I can make immediate decisions to solve basic problems at the factory level," he said.

Industry insiders say that investors and businesspeople from different countries who come to do business in Bangladesh often have to deal with traffic congestion.

Many local businesses are availing these services from companies offering transportation through helicopters in the country.

Apart from this, many expatriates use helicopters to travel from Dhaka to their homes around the country, some for weddings, while others use them for pleasure trips.

Additionally, helicopters are rented out to political leaders for visits to different areas. Due to these reasons, the demand for travelling by helicopter in the country is increasing.

In 1999, South Asian Airlines launched the first commercial helicopter service in the country.

Due to increased demand, over 10 companies now have 36 helicopters,

They have a total of six helicopters, including a brand-new double-engine Bell-429, a single-engine Bell-407GX, and Robinson 66 helicopters. Their investment is Tk 200 crore.

Md Monjur Alam, manager for Operation and Customer Service at Meghna Aviation, said when their company opened, it operated 20 to 24 flights a month. It has now increased to 70 to 80 flights a month.

He said garment company owners mostly use their service to transport foreign buyers to factories while many political figures also book helicopter rides.

Apart from this, many people hire helicopters for various urgent needs. It costs Tk 70,000 to Tk 2.30 lakh per hour to fly by helicopter to anywhere in the country, he said.

South Asian Airlines was formed in 1999. Currently, they have a total of nine helicopters.

Humayun Nasir, head of Flight Operations of the company, said various corporate groups avail services from them.

When their company opened, it operated 1 to 2 flights a month and there were no flights in some months. Now on an average, they operate 7 to 8 flights a day, he added.

Probashir Helicopter, a concern of Probash Time, registered with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms in 2023.

Rony Reja, chairman of Probashir Helicopter, said they are currently operating flights with three helicopters on lease, with expats being the main customers and preferring their service most of the time.

When he started the business, he operated 8 to 10 flights a month. Now it has increased to 50.

It costs Tk 70,000 to Tk 2.80 lakh per hour to fly by helicopter to anywhere in the country, according to Reja.

"We are getting great response from customers by offering various trips like Dhaka city tour, Padma bridge tour and marriage trip," he said.

Beximco Aviation started its journey in 2022 to provide air transport support to Beximco Group, obtaining an air operator certificate on December 1, 2022 from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh with an R 66 and a Bell 430 helicopter.

Gulger Hossain, chief executive officer of Beximco Aviation, said their two helicopters are used only for their own needs. One helicopter is always engaged every working day.

Three to five flights are operated through it for visits to their industrial sites by top management and foreign buyers, he said.

On the other hand, some companies have been forced to shutter their helicopter businesses as they could not keep up with the high cost of operation, according to industry people.

In 2000, Aero Technologies launched helicopter services commercially but shut down in 2008 after failing to attract customers.

In addition, Best Air started to offer helicopter services in 2002 and stopped a few months later. Nitol Aviation Service, a subsidiary of Nitol Group, has also been launched but currently it is inactive.

Meanwhile, Partex Aviation stopped their operations prior to the pandemic.



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Due to this, many exporters are now choosing helicopters as a means of transportation out of Dhaka.

Businesspeople are now regularly using helicopters to visit factories in cities such as Rangpur, Rajshahi, Chattogram and Sylhet, which are far from Dhaka, as well as in Narayanganj, Gazipur, Tongi, or Mymensingh, which are near Dhaka.

with most engaged in the private helicopter rental business employing about 400 people.

The companies are South Asian Airlines, Meghna Aviation, Beximco Aviation, Impress Aviation, Square Air, R&R Aviation, Bangla International Airlines, BCL Aviation, Bashundhara Airways and BRB Air.

Retired air force officers mainly work as helicopter pilots, according to the industry people.

According to the helicopter service providers, it costs Tk 70,000 to Tk 2.5 lakh per hour to fly by helicopter to anywhere in the country, with an additional 30 percent supplementary duty and a 15 percent value added tax.

Meghna Aviation, an enterprise of the Meghna Group of Industries, was established in 2011 and commenced its operations in 2012 to transport its customers to Meghna's manufacturing hubs.

Later, the company decided to expand the service by introducing modern helicopters for emergency services like emergency medical evacuation flights and chartered air transportation from remote areas in Bangladesh.

Demand for air ambulances on the rise

SUKANTA HALDER

The demand for air ambulances has grown steadily in Bangladesh in recent years due to rising affordability and entry of a number of operators.

Service providers have observed an increase in the use of helicopters to carry patients from far-flung districts such as Dinajpur, Cox's Bazar and Rangpur to Dhaka.

Before the latest spike, these areas used to see one or two flights per month. Now it has gone up to six or seven.

Helicopters began to be used to carry patients after chopper services were introduced in Bangladesh around the turn of the millennium, with demand slowly starting to increase from 2002 onwards.

Currently, six local companies provide domestic helicopter services, namely Meghna Aviation, Impress Aviation, Square Air, R&R Aviation, Bangla International Airlines Ltd (BIAL), and South Asian Airlines.

A customer has to pay Tk 1 lakh for a flight to the capital from nearby areas such as Faridpur. For flights to Dhaka from Dinajpur, Cox's Bazar or Rangpur, the fare can be as high as Tk 3.5 lakh.

Sometimes, the fare even surges to Tk 5 lakh as service providers can charge as they please, allege passengers.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Service providers have observed an increase in the use of helicopters to carry patients from far-flung districts such as Dinajpur, Cox's Bazar and Rangpur to Dhaka.

Monjur Alam, manager of operations and customer service at Meghna Aviation, said there were two or three medical flights per month in 2018 but the number has now grown to 15 to 20.

An enterprise of the Meghna Group of Industries, the company initially purchased helicopters for its own commercial use.

It began renting them out in 2016 to recover costs. It has been offering air ambulance services since 2018 and has invested Tk 145 crore.

It has three helicopters specifically to provide air ambulance service.

Additionally, Meghna Aviation also has a modern ground ambulance equipped with all necessary life-saving equipment to provide medical services to patients, according to Alam.

The ambulance is staffed by two trained and licensed paramedics. The company also employs two medical professionals who have evacuated more than 500 patients over the past five years.

Impress Aviation, which was set up in 2013, provides services to the patients using a solitary helicopter, which is busy almost every day.

It currently operates 22 to 25 flights per month, 70 percent of which are for medical purposes, an official said.

It has invested around Tk 30 crore and employs 30 people, the official added.

Bangla International Airlines, a partnership between Union Group and PHP Family, offers charter helicopter services with two helicopters.

Shafiqul Alam, director for flight operations, said the company began operations in 2013 to meet its internal demand.

It later introduced the air ambulance service to offset costs.

Initially, it operated two to three flights for medical purposes per month, but now it has gone up to five or six, he said.

After the opening of the Padma Bridge in June 2022, the demand for air ambulances in districts adjacent to Dhaka has fallen as travel times to the capital have declined drastically.

"It is hurting the business," he said.

Another factor that may affect business are allegations from users that companies sometimes overcharge.

Mohammad Shariful Islam, a businessman in Thakurgaon sadar upazila, said people turn to air ambulances during emergencies.

But although they expect such services to be costly, service providers are charging fares without following any rules and, in some cases, preying on desperation, he claimed.

He recalled that when his wife became seriously ill due to heart and kidney diseases in January 2023, she was taken to a hospital in the northern district. Her condition worsened and the doctor advised them to admit her to a hospital in Dhaka immediately.

Frantically, Islam began searching for an air ambulance. He contacted a company, who quoted the fare at Tk 2.25 lakh, according to Islam.

He agreed and the helicopter was supposed to come the next morning to take the patient to Dhaka. The helicopter arrived, albeit later than expected, turning up at 2:00pm.

But at the last moment, company officials said the fare would not be less than Tk 5 lakh due to bad weather and other complications.

"I was forced to hire an air ambulance for Tk 5 lakh," Islam lamented.

So, the government should pay attention to fare-related issues, he added.

While data on the market size of the air ambulance business in Bangladesh is not readily available, industry insiders estimate that 10 companies operate around 36 helicopters.



A helicopter of Meghna Aviation is seen at a ramp in the general aviation area of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS