



Wouter van Wersch

# Airbus wants Biman to consider aircraft deals on merit, not politics

Says Wouter van Wersch, executive vice president of the plane maker

## RASHIDUL HASAN

Airbus, Europe's largest aeronautics and space company, wants Bangladesh to evaluate Biman Bangladesh Airlines' aircraft procurement based on the merits of the offers rather than political considerations, amid reports that Bangladesh has placed an order for 25 Boeing aircraft as part of a trade agreement with the United States aimed at reducing additional tariffs.

"The decision should be based on the offers, not politics. We want Biman to take the decision based on fact, based on commercial, technical and capacity-building value," Wouter van Wersch, executive vice president (International) of Airbus, said in an interview with The Daily Star and two other aviation reporters of Bangladesh during a visit to Dhaka last week.

He was accompanied by Edward Delahaye, vice president and head of customer accounts for India and South Asia. They also met top government and Biman officials during the short trip to pursue Airbus' offer.

**Asked whether the EU would put political pressure like Boeing, Wouter said, "There is no political pressure. Airbus is an important European company, and Bangladesh-Europe relations are strong. That is why ambassadors speak up. They support us in many countries, not only Bangladesh."**

Their visit came shortly after ambassadors and high commissioners from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the European Union in Dhaka jointly pressed the government to consider Airbus aircraft for Biman at a programme in early November.

Asked whether the EU would put political pressure like Boeing, Wouter said, "There is no political pressure. Airbus is an important European company, and Bangladesh-Europe relations are strong. That is why ambassadors speak up. They support us in many countries, not only Bangladesh."

"They are advocating for a fair, transparent evaluation – the same as we are. The decision must be based on the merits of the offers."

When asked whether the EU is using its export leverage to pressure Bangladesh to buy Airbus and reduce the trade deficit, he said, "Europe wants a level playing field and a factual evaluation. We do not want the aircraft choice to be political. The decision should be based on the offers, not politics."

Biman's fleet is currently dominated by Boeing, with 14 of its 19 aircraft from

## TAKEAWAYS FROM INTERVIEW

### PROPOSAL

Airbus has submitted a fresh proposal for 14 aircraft, fully aligned with Biman's specifications and deadlines

Airbus claims they offer strong value and profitability potential

### FLEET STRATEGY

Introducing Airbus will not be more expensive, even with a mixed fleet

Mixed fleet is manageable – around 80 airlines have transitioned from Boeing to Airbus successfully

### LEASING & DELIVERY

If selected, Airbus is ready to help arrange leased aircraft immediately as a bridge until delivery slots open

Lead times are long due to high demand, so they urge Biman to decide early to secure slots

### POTENTIAL

Bangladesh aviation has strong growth potential, with rising traffic and new terminal

Biman can handle more than 25 aircraft

A350-900 is the only aircraft capable of Dhaka-LA or NY non-stop, carrying more passengers and cargo efficiently

the US manufacturer. Airbus recently submitted a fresh proposal to sell 14 aircraft to the national carrier.

Earlier in August, Bangladesh agreed to buying Boeing wide-body aircraft as part of a trade agreement with the United States aimed at reducing additional tariffs. According to media reports, citing commerce ministry officials, an order for 25 Boeing aircraft has been placed with the first aircraft expected by 2029.

Meanwhile, several experts have pointed out that when fleet expansion decisions are shaped by diplomacy rather than technical assessment, airlines often face downstream challenges: mismatched aircraft sizes, underutilised wide-bodies, expensive maintenance obligations, and gaps in route planning.

Biman's own experience over the past decade illustrates this. The airline has historically operated a mixed Boeing fleet but struggled with underutilisation of certain wide-body aircraft due to lack of long-haul flights and pilots.

About expert criticism that a mixed fleet of Boeing and Airbus aircraft would burden Biman, Wersch said, "Even if Biman continues with Boeing, they would still need training for new aircraft. We have helped about 80 airlines transition from Boeing to Airbus. Our cockpit commonality – from A321 to A350 – saves significant cost because pilots can fly multiple types."

He added, "If Biman chooses a mixed fleet, we are ready. Many airlines operate mixed fleets, but Airbus offers major efficiency advantages due to cross-type commonality."

The Airbus executive also discussed aircraft availability before delivery. "We always do that with every customer. Our leasing team in Toulouse works closely with all major lessors who operate

Airbus aircraft. We can help build a solution to source capacity before our own delivery slots."

"If Biman selects Airbus, we will push and convince lessors to provide aircraft as a bridge until our deliveries start. We are not a lessor, but we will facilitate availability depending on what lessors have," he added.

Asked how long it will take to secure leased aircraft, Wersch said, "If Biman selects Airbus aircraft, we are ready to work with lessors to secure earlier capacity and bridge the gap until our aircraft arrive."

On the A321neo and A350, he said their success contributes to longer lead times. "That is why we encourage all customers, including Biman, to decide early to secure delivery slots."

About the difference between Airbus' previous and latest proposal, he said, "We cannot go into commercial details. However, the number remains 14. We follow Biman's requirements fully."

He added, "We provide the correct economic and commercial conditions, and we believe our products bring strong value and profitability potential for Biman."

Asked whether the interim government can progress with the Airbus proposal, Wersch said, "We cannot comment on the government. Biman is our customer, and we are counting on them to progress the deal. We have seen the same information in the media about political decisions. What matters to us is that our offers are evaluated on their merits."

On whether Biman needs more aircraft beyond the 25 it intends to buy from Boeing, he said, "Regarding the market's perspective the answer is yes. The market is big enough. Bangladesh has significant traffic.

The presence of Emirates, Qatar,

Kuwait, Saudia, Turkish – all operating large aircraft to Dhaka – shows the market is strong. Biman can take a larger share."

The senior Airbus official added that with the right aircraft and the new Dhaka terminal, "Biman can compete better... there is room for more than 25 aircraft. We believe in the growth potential of Bangladesh aviation. With the new terminal and the right fleet, Biman can grow significantly."

On the A350-900's cost-efficiency, fuel economy, and safety, he said, "Absolutely. It has the lowest seat-mile cost due to advanced aerodynamics, materials and engines. The cabin is award-winning and wider than the 787. Its range is also superior. The A350-1000 is the longest-range aircraft in the world."

"For Dhaka-Los Angeles or Dhaka-New York, the A350-900 is the only aircraft that can do it non-stop," he explained. "The A350-900 can fly the route non-stop with more passengers and more cargo. The 787 cannot do this today without a technical stop. Flying direct saves fuel, time and operational cost."

He also highlighted opportunities beyond commercial aircraft, including Earth observation satellites and potential additional units of the C295 transport aircraft. "Our defense products have been operating in Bangladesh for more than 10 years, and we continue supporting them," Wersch said.

He added that Airbus works with both Army Aviation and the Air Force. "The Army Aviation operates two C295s. Discussions continue, but we cannot disclose defence details. You can say that Airbus is ready to help Army Aviation increase its capabilities. Discussions on Earth observation are ongoing."

## Forensic audits for trustworthy governance

MD TOUHIDUL ALAM KHAN

With over three decades in Bangladesh's banking sector, I've witnessed its resilience, potential, and persistent weaknesses. Although long regarded as the backbone of the economy, the sector has seen public trust fade as scandals like loan defaults and money laundering exposed serious flaws.

Restoring faith requires zero tolerance for corruption, with forensic audits to hold wrongdoers accountable and functional audits to strengthen internal operations. But audits alone aren't enough – there must be real consequences for misconduct. Only through firm action and meaningful reform can we rebuild a financial system that is transparent, resilient, and trustworthy.

Having spent much of my career in banking and as a cost and management accountant, I've often seen people use forensic and functional audits interchangeably, unaware of their distinct purposes. Forensic audits are like surgical tools with sharp investigative features. They dig into specific transactions to uncover fraud, embezzlement, or regulatory breaches, answering who did what and how. These audits expose offenders behind major scandals, like the Hallmark loan scam, where tracing illicit fund flows was essential to holding persons accountable.

Functional audits, by contrast, are like diagnostic check-ups. They don't just search for wrongdoers; they assess whether systems work as they should. These audits reveal enablers of misconduct, such as weak internal controls, outdated protocols, or poorly enforced compliance. While forensic audits uncover the damage, functional audits help prevent it. Together, they form a powerful duo – one reveals the rot, the other covers the cracks.

However, uncovering problems means little without action. Investigative reports often lie untouched because institutions lack the will and courage to act. Zero tolerance must be enforced, and audit findings must lead to real accountability. That means identifying individuals instead of broadly blaming "the system." Consequences should include legal action, asset recovery, and blacklisting when necessary.

Zero tolerance also requires transparency; keeping audit results hidden to protect reputations only intensifies public distrust.

To build a sustainable, audit-centric ecosystem, institutional reforms are essential. Auditors must be trained in forensic techniques and equipped with digital tools to match modern financial crimes. Whistle-blowers must be protected, audit independence ensured, and implementation of audit recommendations mandated within strict timelines. Regular functional audits of IT systems, loan approval processes, and compliance mechanisms should be the norm. Automating loan disbursements can reduce fraud risks linked to human discretion.

A transparent and accountable banking sector is not just good policy; it is the foundation of a stable economy. When the system is clean and reliable, foreign investors take notice, borrowing becomes cheaper, and the economy benefits. As a service provider and depositor, I know how important it is to feel that savings are safe and that the system won't collapse under hidden corruption or mismanagement. Building such trust requires strong regulations, consistent oversight, and experienced, principled leadership – people who value institutional integrity. That is how Bangladesh can build a banking culture rooted in accountability and long-term stability.

Bangladesh's banking sector stands at a crossroads. The choice between inaction and meaningful reform is clear. Building an audit-centric culture isn't only about catching offenders; it is about preventing offences before they begin. Bangladesh Bank, the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission, and other regulators have already taken steps to conduct authentic audits without hesitation. Banks must prioritise ethics over short-term gains, and civil society must demand accountability. A balanced combination of rigorous forensic audits, efficient functional audits, and immediate action against misconduct can guide the sector toward integrity. It is now an urgent demand to act for a sustainable banking framework.

The writer is managing director & CEO of NRBC Bank PLC



## A scammer dies, but the rot in Bangladesh's banks lives on

### MD MEHEDI HASAN

Before 2010, Hall-Mark was a little-known business group. It came into the spotlight over the following two years and ultimately became a household name due to a loan scandal involving more than Tk 3,500 crore.

It was the largest loan scam involving state-run Sonali Bank at the time, which shocked many and sparked a huge public outcry.

One of the masterminds of the scam, carried out using fake documents, was Tanvir Mahmud, then managing director of the Hall-Mark Group.

He had been serving a life sentence in Dhaka Central Jail for his involvement in the scandal. On November 29 this year, he died while undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

He may be gone, but the effects of the loan irregularities still linger. Since then, the country's financial sector has witnessed even larger scams – one after another – creating a ripple effect, deepening the crisis, and ultimately victimising thousands of depositors.

Sonali Bank has still been unable to recover the loan, carrying this burden year after year. The banking sector is now heavily burdened by widespread irregularities.

After Hall-Mark came the BASIC Bank loan scandal, the Janata Bank-AnonTex loan irregularities, the Padma Bank loan anomalies, the PK Halder scam, and the S. Alam loan



Tanvir Mahmud

irregularities, which have reached an entirely different magnitude.

Tk 4,500 crore was swindled during the BASIC Bank scam between 2009 and 2013, while PK Halder and his associates siphoned off Tk 10,000 crore.

The Crescent Group swindled Tk 1,746 crore, while Tk 3,500 crore was involved in the alleged scam by Md Mahabubul Haque Chisty and his associates.

Due to the massive scale of scams and irregularities, defaulted loans have reached a record Tk 6.44 lakh crore – 36 percent of total disbursed loans, data show.

Distressed assets, including rescheduled and written-off loans, stand at Tk 9.5 lakh crore. Not only that, a number of banks are now unable to repay depositors, while at least 16 banks are unable to disburse new loans.

Amid this situation, the interim government

has taken the initiative to merge five banks and liquidate nine non-bank financial institutions in the interest of depositors.

The Hall-Mark scandal is often described as a blessing in disguise for Sonali Bank, as it made the state-run bank far more cautious.

In the years that followed, while massive loan irregularities hit other state-owned and private banks, no major scandal occurred at Sonali Bank.

However, the bank is still bearing the burden of Hall-Mark's liabilities. Sonali Bank has not been able to sell the collateral it collected against the group's loans.

Contacted, Md Shawkat Ali Khan, managing director and CEO of Sonali Bank, told The Daily Star that the bank has identified and taken possession of 134 acres of Hall-Mark's land. Efforts are underway to determine how these assets can be sold, he added.

"We have already spoken with BIDA (Bangladesh Investment Development Authority) so they can bring in foreign buyers and facilitate the sale. We have also proposed that the government consider taking over the land," he said.

Hall-Mark's current liabilities at Sonali Bank total Tk 2,500 crore, while the bank has so far recovered only Tk 13 crore in cash.

Khan added that the financial health of the bank has improved due to its cautious approach since the Hall-Mark scam.

## Airbus says most of its recalled jets now modified

REUTERS, Paris

Airbus fleets were returning towards normal operations on Monday after the European planemaker pushed through abrupt software changes faster than expected, as it wrestled with safety headlines long focused on rival Boeing.

Dozens of airlines from Asia to the United States said they had carried out a snap software retrofit ordered by Airbus, and mandated by global regulators, after

**Airbus said the vast majority of around 6,000 of its A320-family fleet affected by safety alert had been modified, with fewer than 100 jets still requiring work**

a vulnerability to solar flares emerged in a recent mid-air incident on a JetBlue A320.

Airbus said on Monday that the vast majority of around 6,000 of its A320-family fleet affected by the safety alert had been modified, with fewer than 100 jets still requiring work.

But some require a longer process and Colombia's Avianca continued to halt bookings for dates until December 8.

Sources familiar with the matter said the unprecedented decision to

recall about half the A320-family fleet was taken shortly after the possible but unproven link to a drop in altitude on the JetBlue jet emerged late last week.

Shares in Airbus were down 2.1 percent in early trading in Paris.

Following talks with regulators, Airbus issued its 8-page alert to hundreds of operators on Friday, effectively ordering a temporary grounding by ordering the repair before next flight.

"The thing hit us about 9 p.m. (Jeddah time) and I was back in here about 9:30. I was actually quite surprised how quickly we got through it: there are always complexities," said Steven Greenway, CEO of Saudi budget carrier Flyadeal.

The instruction was seen as the broadest emergency recall in the company's history and raised immediate concerns of travel disruption particularly during the busy US Thanksgiving weekend.

The sweeping warning exposed the fact that Airbus does not have full real-time awareness of which software version is used given reporting lags, industry sources said.

At first airlines struggled to gauge the impact since the blanket alert lacked affected jets' serial numbers. A Finnair passenger said a flight was delayed on the tarmac for checks.

Over 24 hours, engineers zeroed in on individual jets.