

"Announce tourism reopening date to the world!"

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Dhaka : The unfortunate situation brought by the Covid-19 pandemic hit the nascent tourism industry of the country devastatingly. Similarly, the tourism sector globally had to suffer such ill fate. Yet, foreign countries, even the regional neighbours of ours - India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and others - managed to revive their tourism with timely and effective reopening measures while Bangladesh still aches.

The government and the tourism authorities of the country has this far failed to do enough to support the rebound of the industry. There is no plan-at least this far-to help restart the industry, even when the situation now permits as we have greatly contained the coronavirus pandemic.

Reports predicted that in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh there will be a 30 per cent decline in annual growth of inbound travel by regions, considering an 8-month impact period. Due to the delayed recovery, hundreds of travel and tour companies are on the verge of closing temporarily or permanently and a significant number of tour operators, small hotels, motels, resorts and restaurants are already shut down.

As per studies conducted by Pacific Asia Travel association (PATA) Bangladesh chapter, there is a loss of BDT 6 billion in the aviation sector and BDT 15 billion in the hospitality sector. Hence, it is high time Bangladesh restarted inbound tourism.



One of the first "must-dos", in this regard, is announcing a tourism reopening date to the world. And the government must do it immediately, urged tourism stakeholders of the country, as already the popular winter travel season has begun. And if the window of opportunity is lost, the country's inbound tourism industry will have revenue losses of millions, claimed the leading tourism stakeholders of the country. They said, many groups are willing to visit Bangladesh from Europe. But their respective governments are not allowing them as the country did not announce to welcome tourists yet. Hence, there are high chances the tour operators will have their planned tours cancelled during this winter season, leading to losses of millions of dollars.

About the restart of tourism in Bangladesh in the post pandemic era, Shahid Hamid, President of Pacific Asia Travel Association Bangladesh Chapter, suggested, domestic, regional and cross-border tourism are key now. Earlier, Bangladesh used to get travellers from European or Oceanian markets. But, in the post pandemic era, no one from those source markets wants to travel long haul now.

Domestic tourism has been already witnessing a great boom in post pandemic. As international travel remained restricted for a long time due to Covid-19, the domestic tourism sector successfully took the advantage and flourished.

Hence, regional and cross-border tourism are what's left. And they can be the only drivers now. Therefore, we must facilitate inbound tourism from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and other countries in the region through public-private partnership, urged Shahid Hamid.

Without inbound tourism, the country is losing the opportunity to earn foreign currency and generate further employment, said Taufique Rahman, CEO of Journey Plus.

He mentioned, all countries around us are now open for tourism. Pakistan, Myanmar, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and even Maldives have reopened. So should Bangladesh. We must form a restarting plan now and it should be a year-round plan for 2022, Taufique stressed. "We must announce Bangladesh to be safe, Covid-19 free for travel and open to tourists," he claimed.

On arrival tourist visas should drive inbound tourism growth now as well as e-visa facility. The government can also offer 5 lac tourist visas free like India. Nevertheless, attractive tour packages are a must to grow inbound arrivals.

Masud Hossain, Managing Director of Bengal Tours urged the industry to focus on smart tourism, friends and family visit, and nature tourism. These are markets to capitalise on, he claimed, adding, we can promote tent stays, self-cook, cycling and other activities amid nature. And without government initiative, the private sector cannot succeed, Masud sighed.

We must comply with the regional standard of tourism facilities and services, Masud noted, if we are to attract tourists from the region.

Mahbubul Islam, CEO of Riverine Tours said he was told by his European counterparts that they are having to send group tourists to other countries in the region but Bangladesh, as we have not announced reopening yet. Meaning, we are losing business to our neighbours.

Junayed Zia, CEO, Tours and Trips Bangladesh, asked the government to follow the neighbours' strategies for reopening.

Tanvir Ahmed, Director, Silverwave Tours Ltd, stressed, flights are now open to and from Bangladesh. We must target those countries to brand Bangladesh as ideal destination to visit.

Rezaul Ekram, President of Bangladesh Inbound Tour Operators Association, urged the government to sit with the industry stakeholders and finalise the restarting plan. Visa facilities must be made easier while tourism bubbles must be established cross-border, claimed Rezaul.

Rashedul Hasan, Owner, Nirjhor Tours, sighed with grief that there is no proper branding activity of Bangladesh tourism in the global arena. People abroad do not even know that there is no quarantine restriction in Bangladesh, he noted. B2B activities with regional counterparts through private-public partnership will facilitate tourism for all parties, he urged.

On this note, Javed Ahmed, CEO of Bangladesh Tourism Board, assured, in a matter of days, BTB will sit with the tourism ministry to discuss a reopening plan. He mentioned, it has been addressed to the Cabinet already. Once they finalise the tourism restarting plan, they will be able to announce the reopening date soon.