

Copter service to get helipad handler

KINSUK BASU

Bengal Aerotropolis Projects Limited (BAPL), which oversees and manages ticketing operations for the helicopter service to government-promoted destinations in the districts, could be hired to handle technical aspects such as helipad maintenance.

Sources said the government has planned to offer additional responsibility of maintaining and operating helipads at six destinations to the BAPL, promoters of the airport city in Andal.

"The government doesn't have the expertise to deal with technicalities such as upkeep of a helipad's landing and take-off area. The BAPL can manage it better," said an official in the transport department.

BAPL sources said the company was prepared to take up helicopter operations since it already has a team of 30-odd airport technical officials.

"Each team member has at least 15 years of experience while their second-in-command is from Changi airport (Singapore). Our competence is on a par with the best in the business," a BAPL official told Metro.

"We would be happy to take up the responsibility if the Bengal government wants us to," he added.

"Our technical team is aware of the civil aviation norms on helipads, like what and how it should be to hold the weight of a helicopter," he said. This team has been as-



Pawan Hans flies to six destinations from the flying club in Behala

signed to the airport in Andal.

Helipad readiness entails regular maintenance and recheck of the safety norms for passengers alighting or boarding a helicopter.

Resident, the BAPL officials would have to ensure zero obstruction on the approach path of a helicopter to a helipad and keep firefighting arrangements in tip-top condition.

The directorate general of civil aviation (DGCA) carries out periodical inspection of helipads. "First, the facilities will require our approval. Second, we will inspect them time to time," a DGCA official said.

Regular checks could spare the fledgling service the blunders and boost passenger confidence. Many in the government were left red-faced when the inaugural Santiniketan-Calcutta flight got stuck in a hurriedly-built Birbhum he-

lipad in January.

The wheels sank into the soft surface after the chopper landed at Parulidanga, 3km from Santiniketan.

The proposed Calcutta-Digha service landed in trouble too because Pawan Hans had objected to the tree-lined helipad's location at the beach town. Pawan Hans officials claimed after a trial run that casuarina trees near the helipad were obstructing visibility during landing.

A source said transport officials have not been able to give full attention to such technical urgencies because of other work.

"Since the BAPL is prepared to handle this work for a nominal fee, the government can work as a facilitator," an official said.

Sources said the helicopter service that took off following an agreement with Pawan

Hans in December 2012 has flown in the "culture of flying" within Bengal.

Government officials said bookings have been satisfactory despite the initial helipad hitches. "The response has been encouraging. We have bookings for almost 34-35 hours of flying time a month against the 40 hours allotted to Pawan Hans," a transport official said.

According to the deal, government would pay Rs 50 lakh for 40 flying hours a month to Pawan Hans.

"We will introduce from Tuesday flights to Haldia every alternate week at Rs 1,500 a seat," transport minister Madan Mitra said. "Passengers from Malda can take a helicopter ride to Bahurghat for just Rs 500 every Wednesday."

These moves are apparently dictated by a growing inter-

est in flying to hot spots such Ganga Sagar, Durgapur and Santiniketan — besides Malda and Bahurghat in north Bengal — without wasting time on bumpy road trips.

Chief minister Mamata Banerjee's promise of offering faster connectivity to the districts is growing wings but technical requirements of day-to-day flight operations remain a worry.

Since all the flights from Calcutta take-off from the flying club in Behala, the transport department has written to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) to ensure basic infrastructure such as clean washrooms at the facility.

"Two civic officials would be deployed at the flying club to deal with the infrastructure and service issues," an officer said. "Private operators were also enquiring about the use hangars at the flying club."

Once the Behala facility is equipped to handle more flights, the government will introduce helicopter service to the Sunderbans.

Sources said a team led by Shantivanu Basu, the district magistrate of South 24 Parganas, has made several sorties to a place near Pikhralaya where a helipad would be built.

"Clearance, especially from the ministry of forest and environment, has been taken into account," minister Mitra said. "The Sunderbans price band would be within Rs 1,500."

Fresh flights

- Malda to Bahurghat: Rs 500 (Wednesdays)
- Calcutta to Haldia: Rs 1,500 (alternate Tuesdays)

In the pipeline

- Calcutta to Sunderbans: Around Rs 1,500