

Alternatives

In collaboration with  centre for alternatives

When Flying is No More a Fun .

From the *Alternatives* Desk

I have this unnerving feeling that very few people made an effort to understand as to why the young man would slip into the wheel carriage of a plane and make a desperate attempt to leave the country of his birth! Not that I was not shocked by the news, but what shocked me most was the nonchalant treatment of the issue by the general public. Indeed, like the concerned authority, most viewed the event simply as a thing of 'security lapse' at the airport. There was hardly any focus on the young man, who I thought died tragically with all the innocence by almost reliving a filmy fantasy or worse, the experience of a cartoon character! And that is what disturbs me the most and makes me worried.

We are all familiar with some of the photographic shots from the fall of Saigon: pro-American/anti-communist Vietnamese desperately trying to get a place in US helicopters just before the final American pullout. But then, in this case one can understand the state of desperation, saving life from the commies! What about the young man? What was he running from and why so desperately? Even if the answer is 'poverty' (which may well be the case), it still does not justify the means he chose to flee the country. In fact, the means (slipping into the wheel carriage of the plane) almost suggests that one is imprisoned and does not have the option to openly or freely fly abroad. The point, although many would argue is not true, is worth considering.

There is an obvious class dimension to flying, not that the poverty-stricken masses cannot afford to fly (which is obvious) but that the affordable few gets divided on class lines, with mostly the non-elite facing all the obstacles towards making such a journey. It has always puzzled me as to why one would require such a great effort or even suffer from serious tension in getting a simple thing as one's passport! Having a passport, after all, is a human as well as a citizen's right. And it ought to be given even when someone is not flying or going abroad. Let me make a side remark here. I still think that the government could have saved quite a trouble, including some money, if it had considered using the passport as voter's ID. Now, what will a *krishak* do with a passport? And this is where I think we need to change the way we see and think of things, our very state of mind and being.

But making a passport is only the beginning of the peril. The lesser the person is connected with the predominantly elitist network of things, the greater are the obstacles. This could range from getting a visa, saying 'good bye' to the loved ones at the airport to even passing the immigration counter and boarding the plane. One almost is made to feel that he/she has committed a sin for having decided to leave the country, however short the period of stay abroad may be.

I would, however, end with something that falls within the purview of the elite, mainly to point out that the (post-independence) elite has also remained *subservient* to a travelling structure begotten from the colonial times (that is, when the current elite was a non-elite)! This refers to the requirement of a 'no objection certificate' (the well-known NOC) on the part of government officials and members serving in autonomous bodies, including government funded Universities. What purpose does it serve? Is it not true that if one decides to leave the country and take up a job abroad no amount of NOCs can stop him/her? And where are all these NOCs kept after being shown at the immigration counter? Is it not sheer misuse of time, money and manpower? A friend of mine teaching in Delhi University, which is also government funded, was telling me that they do not require such a thing. In that case, why is it required here? The answer to all these questions could very well lie in the now acknowledged truism that 'a subservient mind is capable of reproducing only subservient things.' And subservient is no fun....

Hazards of Getting Visa Some Suggestions

by Lailufar Yasmin

The long queue of persons in front of embassies, specially in the US Embassy is a common picture. At the same time, there is no shed, let alone any seating arrangements in the place of collecting visa form in any of the diplomatic missions, except for the British High Commission. The British embassy is the one and only exception in this regard, which provides a spacious place, with seating arrangements where people can protect themselves from the scorching heat or heavy shower. A large number of people go abroad for medical treatment. There is no special arrangement for ill persons.

PEOPLE travelling between sovereign countries carry travel documents. These documents are issued by governments to verify citizenship and request other governments to give the bearer all lawful aid and protection. Travel documents contain description of the bearer and identifying photographs that meet rigid specifications. The documents used to travel outside the boundary of a state in most cases contain two types of official papers. One is a passport and the other is visa. The latter is sealed in the passport indicating entry permission. While issuing a passport is the internal matter of a country, granting of a visa is external in character since it depends on the country of visit. In many cases a visa must be obtained before the traveller leaves home. The visa allows the visitor to remain in the foreign country for a specific period of time.

Visa is now required by most of the countries for entry to control movement of people around the world. Before going abroad, one of the main hassles travellers have to face is the procurement of a visa from embassies or high commissions. First one has to collect the visa application form, fill it up according to the instructions and submit it to the pertinent diplomatic mission.

In the economic context of our country, the culture of travelling abroad as part of tourism has not flourished much. On

the other hand, the flow of people trying to go abroad and seeking passport and visa suddenly increased after opportunities for working abroad opened up to the middle class. Complaints of harassment while granting visa also started to appear in the scene, along with complaints of inadequacy of facilities provided by diplomatic missions.

The Alternative team visited several embassies to get some first hand impression and talked with several persons who frequently visit foreign countries and have ample experience in this matter. The diplomatic missions visited are the US Embassy, the British High Commission, the French Embassy, the Dutch Embassy, the Indian High Commission, the Royal Thai Embassy and the Saudi Embassy to observe the actual situation. The team has given ranks to these diplomatic missions using some performance criteria such as sitting arrangements provided for the applicants, behaviour of the visa officials and the procedure of granting visa including the complications or simplicity of visa form, along with the experiences of visitors in these countries. The first position, in such ranking goes to the British High Commission, which not only provides the best service among these diplomatic missions but was also identified by the persons that we talked with as the best behaved. The French Embassy, which also represents Spain, Portugal and Austria, is

identified as better in comparison to other diplomatic missions. Here is a detailed discussion of the services provided by these diplomatic missions.

Collecting the Visa Form: Where to Stand?

First comes the question of collecting the visa form. Different diplomatic missions have different time for form collection. The Saudi Embassy stops collecting visa by 10.30 am while the Thai and French embassies have set 11.30 am and 12.00 o'clock respectively ending giving forms. So a person wishes to visit either of the two countries around similar period and wishes to collect visa forms find him/herself in a puzzled condition to manage the both on the same day in a city faced with severe traffic jam. On the other hand, the long queue of persons in front of embassies, specially in the US Embassy is a common picture. At the same time, there is no shed, let alone any seating arrangements in the place of collecting visa form in any of the diplomatic missions, except for the British High Commission. The British embassy is the one and only exception in this regard, which provides a spacious place, with seating arrangements where people can protect themselves from the scorching heat or heavy shower. A large number of people go abroad for medical treatment. There is no special arrangement for ill persons. On the other hand, in most

of the diplomatic missions people have to stand in long queues for hours to get a visa. One has to queue in front of the US embassy since 5 a.m. It is an open secret that places in queues are even sold.

Visa Form — A Puzzle

After collecting a visa form, comes the question of filling it out. Filling out a visa form almost appears as a test question to most of the applicants. In this regard, the visa form of the Indian High Commission contains most inquiries. In fact there are some people who stand in front of the High Commission to help applicants fill up the forms on a minimum charge. In this category, the Indian High Commission receives the last position. The visa form of the Royal Thai Embassy has only one page, with minimum queries. The forms of other embassies are also not much complicated to fill out. The US Embassy form has added a new question that asks if the respondent is a member or representative of a terrorist organization. One can certainly understand the naivety of the question; a terrorist will never confess and identify him/herself as a member of such a party, if s/he wishes to go to the USA.

Behaviour of the Diplomatic Missions

There are not many complaints directly against the diplomatic missions. But the

Continued on page 7



Hazard of seeing off: Airport is a restricted area, you just cannot enter in but you just cannot resist the desire of seeing the plane carrying your near and dear ones fly off. —Star photo by Zahidul I Khan

Ensuring a Safe Arrival

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

The experiences vary according to the socio-economic status of the passengers. While those who have extra money to spare for the satisfaction of some dishonest airport and custom officials or have 'good connections' can more or less easily cross pass the airport formalities, the rest suffer.

THE smuggled gold and drugs receive better treatment than the people in our airport — a young businessman of Dhaka expressed his frustrations and agony in these words at the state of affairs prevailing at the Zia. This person who has to travel frequently within and outside South Asia, had awoken some experiences specially in the early days of his going abroad. The complaints range from misconduct by the airport officials to inadequate security arrangements outside the airport. In fact most of the people I talked with to learn about their experience at the Zia International Airport revealed a frustrating picture of our airport management and security system. Huge corruption, mismanagement and lack of any meaningful effort for the betterment of the system have often left the passengers at jeopardy after tedious long journeys.

Indeed the experiences vary according to the socio-economic status of the passengers. While those who have extra money to spare for the satisfaction of some dishonest airport and custom officials or have 'good connections' can more or less easily cross pass the airport formalities, the rest suffer.

The complaints that are generally raised by the incoming passengers may be divided broadly into three categories: a) harassment by the immigration and customs officials; b) inadequate facilities for transit passengers and those who lands late at night and c) lack of proper security and adequate transport arrangement after coming out from the airport.

I in fact found it very much difficult to suggest practical alternative arrangements for the betterment of the system since, the mitigation of the problems primarily calls for changes in the values and the attitude of the officials involved. And the task indeed demands the development of a system of good governance. Nevertheless, after talking to a number of persons who travel abroad and some concerned officials of the civil aviation customs department and Bangladesh Biman I attempted to outline some read-

justments within the current framework that may be of some help to the troubled and frustrated passengers. Before going into details, a brief discussion on the type of problems usually faced by the incoming passengers mentioned above is perhaps necessary.

Tangled by the Disorders:

Troubled by the Customs Department: When a passenger arrives in Dhaka, the person has to mainly cross pass two desks. One is the immigration and the other is the customs. There we have huge complaints concerning the misconduct and corrupt practices specially in the customs department. In fact the equation of 'customs officials = bribe takers' has been almost taken for granted in our society. The passengers are frequently asked for money and if that is not provided they are harassed regarding their luggage. On the other hand many illegal goods are allowed to go through the customs barriers in exchange of money. Some even complained that international smugglers often have underhand dealings with the customs officials. The victims of such misconduct and exploitation are mainly those belonging to the poorer sections of the society. The huge number of the labours who come from the Middle Eastern or the South East Asian Countries are frequently asked for extra money for taking in the goods they have brought for their families. These people who often do not know the airport formalities and procedures are vulnerable to the threats of the officials, end up paying a huge amount of money and if they fail their luggage are often confiscated.

Complaints have also been raised about the treatment of the luggage during the checking. The way some of the officials take out the luggage and scatter them all-around often cause their damage. But the losers rarely get any compensation.

For the so-called 'elites' the picture is quite different. A senior government official who used to come through the 'Green Channel' or the 'VIP Channel' said that once he could not submit a custom officer in checking his luggage properly even after asking thrice. The event was a hilarious one for

him but actually this reflected the hideous condition of our customs service as a whole.

Tormented by the Stolen Luggage: Another vital problem the passengers face concerns the lack of security for their luggage. The Biman Bangladesh Airlines is in charge of handling the luggage of the passengers. The Lost and Found Department of Bangladesh Biman received approximately 2997 complaints about missing luggage during 1996-97. Some officials mentioned in this regard that the handling equipment of the Biman is much less than needed. However some regular passengers have different opinion. One of them said that there is an organized group in the airport who regularly pilfers luggage of the incoming passengers. He himself once found his handbag ripped off in the bottom and some valuable gift items were missing. 'Surely lack of handling equipment is not the reason' he said. One senior official involved with the airport authority admitted that some of the officials involved in luggage handling definitely are involved with luggage pilfering, specially those of the lower strata. The investigations about the stolen luggage are conducted by the security department. But the department can only recommend to take measures against the responsible person, it does not have any authority to take action. Therefore the accused persons belonging to the Biman or any other department often do not have to face disciplinary or other actions due to what one official described 'internal politics'. On the other side, there seemed to exist a sort of resentment among the officials of the other departments that the security department deliberately gives reports to embarrass them, while not properly carrying out their duty of supervising the luggage handling procedure. The attitude of blaming one department by another however is only complicating the problem. And the bottom-line remains that hundreds of passengers are not only losing their valuable goods, but are also losing their faith on the entire airport management.

Un-ported by the Porters: In our airport there is no longer

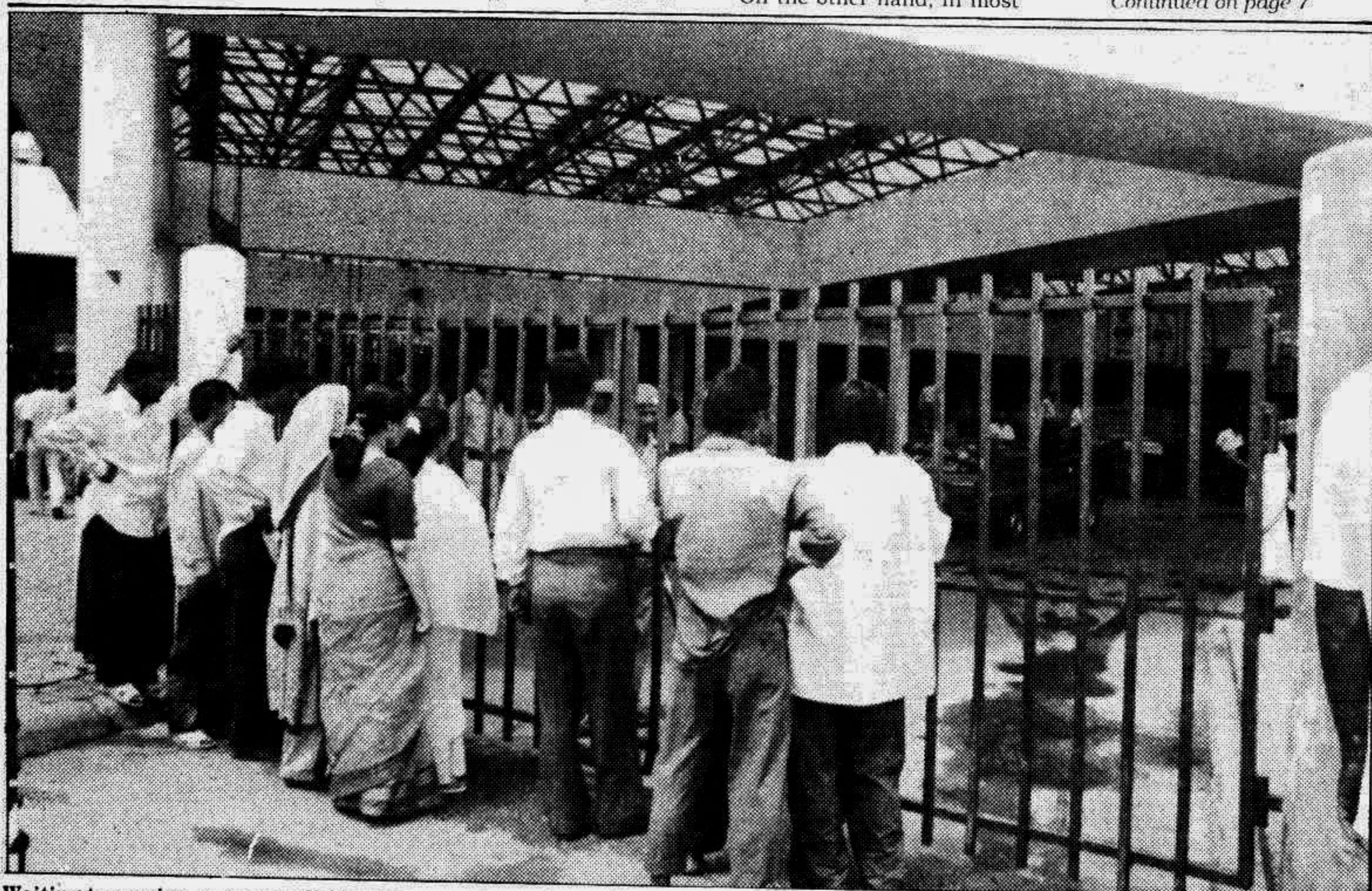
any officially recognized system of porters for helping passengers to carry their luggage. But some of the people I talked to, made a point that sometimes they were harassed by some so called porters inside the airport while moving their trolleys. The authorities commented in this regard that those who are employed for collecting the empty trolleys might have something to do with such harassment.

No Room for Rest: This may sound absurd but the Zia International Airport does not have proper facilities for the rest and leisure of the transit passengers, passengers of the delayed flights or those who are stranded in the airport due to hartals or late night arrival. The transit lounge is unclean so also the toilets. People were seen to be tired sitting in shabby sofas. The sight indeed gave a feeling of discomfort but not more than those who were suffering. One civil-aviation officer informed me that during the night a specific place in the lounge is vacated for those who land after midnight and are not willing to go outside. In that place I did not find any arrangement for the relaxation of the passengers except for toilets! This is no doubt a serious shortcoming of the Dhaka Airport. One official of the Bangladesh Biman however informed me that they serve food for their transit passengers who have to spend more than six hours in the airport. Also they have arrangements with six mid-ranking hotels where the passengers are taken for overnight stay. I asked some of the civil-aviation officials about this shortcoming. One of them informed me that the civil-aviation has a plan to construct a three star or a five star hotel near the airport. But by far now this deficiency is indeed causing serious problems for the passengers and giving the international ones a negative impression about our country.

Baffled Outside the Airport

The sad story for the passengers does not end inside the airport. The dejected passengers perhaps find themselves in

Continued on page 7



Waiting to receive, or to see off. Not always a pleasant experience.

—Star photo by Zahidul I Khan



Crowding at counter: Whether it's a bank or ticket counter, passport or visa counter, you can hardly avoid the hassle. —Star file photo