

Hazards of Flying Abroad

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

A Long Way to Boarding Bridge

by Muhammad Ali Tareque

Several times the security system of the exterior of the check-in lounge has been changed following events that manifest the vulnerability of it. The incident of Tommy Mia is known to all. After this incident, the airport authority has taken steps not to allow the non-passengers without pass to go through the ramp that goes towards the first floor, i.e. the check-in lounge.

Globalization is a much talked about topic for academicians and politicians today. Yet when one observes the channels of physical communication and the hazards associated with it, especially in the context of the developing societies one finds we have a long way to go. Air travel being the most used and most effective means, it is therefore important to talk about it. An international airport is the transition point of social, economical and geographical differences between two countries. Zia International Airport (ZIA) being the only international airport (in the real sense) of Bangladesh is gradually getting busier year by year. It requires a regular reshuffling in its setup. In this write-up some shortcomings of this airport for the passengers

Security Lapses at ZIA

Security system circumscribes several aspects. It is an ever-evolving 'process of assumption and presumption. Assumption in the sense, the authority has to undertake some steps regarding security due to requirement. And presumption in the sense, the authority may have to presume some vulnerability of the system due to some future change and take some steps accordingly. The vulnerability of a big system being difficult to be worked out at a time, it requires an adaptive process. But this adaptation should have a definite course. This course may or may not always be changed instantaneously according to requirements, due to the availability of resources or readiness to do so. But of course, whimsical steps are not expected, which is how-

ever very common about ZIA. Several times the security system of the exterior of the check-in lounge has been changed following events that manifest the vulnerability of it. The incident of Tommy Mia is known to all. After this incident, the airport authority has taken steps not to allow the non-passengers without pass to go through the ramp that goes towards the first floor, i.e. the check-in lounge.

In fact, ZIA possesses an acre area of 1806 acres, including undisputed and disputed lands. It is undoubtedly quite an arduous job to secure such a huge area from encroachment. The runway area is much more insecure than it is actually. Certain institutional and legal problems are involved here. Firstly, there is a legal obligation of the authority against building solid wall surrounding the airport area. The boundary must be porous. Thus it automatically becomes very weak. In order to secure this a strong and big security arrangement is required. This involves a high level of expenses as well. Consequently the authorities have left the matter unattended.

Secondly, the area of the airport adjoining the Baunia and Dolipara area is susceptible to infringement. Here, a public path has been constructed that cuts across the airport area. The authority is unable to cope with this situation as allegedly some influential persons are involved in this construction. Of course, some guards are continuously on duty there. But that is not enough to obstruct the trespassers.

One last and most important bottleneck is that the security

personnel there have no right to fire on the trespassers. It has made their position totally ineffective. Even at times certain incidents have taken place there that bear testimony to their ineffectiveness. For instance, often the intruders come there and take away the pillars of the fence; when the guards approach them, they ridicule them saying that they can cause them no harm as they are forbidden to fire on them. In fact the trespassers frequently enter the airport to steal the signal lamps, the fencing materials and other things. Furthermore there always remains the possibility of people being run over by aircrafts.

If the powers of the security personnel cannot be enhanced at least the vulnerable area may be enclosed by a permanent boundary. Alternatively, the exposed area may be used as a separated land. In this way a third Tommy Mia (in fact, this is the second case of this kind) will probably not be able to die freeze into a frozen symbol of stupidity of oneself and the indolence of the authority.

Apart from the security issue, the passengers also have to face a number of problems, unnecessary and unwanted hassles. Some of these are discussed below for necessary action by the authorities concerned.

Discrimination
As pointed out earlier that after the Tommy Mia incident the security has taken steps to filter out the non-passengers at the base of the ramp that he/she is going to collect the pass the person is allowed to cross. This is a major weakness of the security system as anyone may say so. But usually people coming to the cities from the villages to see off relatives are unaware of these, as such one again observes an urban/elite bias in the system.

Pass System - a Paradox

There is a pass system for the non-passenger to get into the check-in lounge. There are two flaws in it. Firstly, no definite criteria are followed in issuing the pass. Moreover, a number of the officers of the Civil Aviation are allowed to issue the pass indiscriminately. As there is no accountability of civil aviation about guaranteeing the innocence of the officers there is a catch in it.

Secondly, there is a contradiction in the process of handing over the pass. The booth from where the pass is issued is located on the first floor. In order to obtain the pass the non-passengers therefore have to

cross the ramp, which legally no non-passenger is allowed to cross. But if a non-passenger just tells the security guard at the base of the ramp that he/she is going to collect the pass the person is allowed to cross. This is a major weakness of the security system as anyone may say so. But usually people coming to the cities from the villages to see off relatives are unaware of these, as such one again observes an urban/elite bias in the system.

Pass for Bribes

Many non-pass holders also enter the check-in lounge illegally. There is in fact a racket of people who roam about the place and offer the non-passengers to get them into the lounge on payment of Taka 50 or 100.

This is turning into a business and is seriously hampering the security system.

Porters

Officially the ZIA has no porters. But some trolley-men are there who are supposed to collect the trolleys left by the passengers outside the lounge. They pester the departing passengers and often forcefully do the loading and unloading for them. Then they shove them for tips. This causes much harassment to the passengers who often do not carry local currencies with them.

Excess Counter

The passengers are subject to enter the immigration zone after completing the check-in formalities. In the immigration

zone there is an immigration counter which is obligatory for the passengers to pass by. But recently an extra counter has been setup. This is not an obligatory counter but is supposed to facilitate the work of the immigration officials during the rush hours. But it has been alleged that officials involved there actually demand money from the passengers in order to let them pass by. This, we believe, is a violation of fundamental rights of passengers and ZIA officials should look into the matter immediately.

Dismay of the See-offers

There are three categories of 'see-offers' in the airport. The first consists of see-offers who are allowed to get into the check-in lounge due to their social or political connections or positions. The second are the see-offers who crowd in front of the check-in lounge. The third are the see-offers who stand under the open sky, exposed to sun and rain, at the base of the ramp. The above, as can be seen,

is again class based and highly discriminatory. In order to make the situation more humane and less discriminatory for the see-offs, and also to ease off the security pressure on the authority, we suggest the creation of a See-Off Center.

The see-off center may have some flower shops, gift shops, lavatory, refreshment room etc. Since the ZIA has ample available land, it can easily be constructed nearby. To avoid the excess pressure of the visitors, the authority may charge a certain amount of money to let the visitors get into the 'see-off center'. This will add to the income of ZIA and at the same time avoid unwanted crowding.

Authorities at ZIA must remember that air travel is not in vogue in a poor country like ours. For many migrant workers it perhaps means their only and last ray of hope and survival. So ZIA indeed is duty bound to make their as well as others departure a humane and tolerable one.

The author is fellow, Centre for Alternatives

An Anguished Cry

“WITH reference to the advertisement in The Daily Star, January 14, 1999, I narrate hereunder my appalling plight in the Singapore Changi Airport on 02/04/97 while flying to New York, USA. My Singapore International Airlines (SIA) TKT# FLT SIA Dhaka, Departure time approximately 2130 hours on April 01 1997.

On arrival at Changi, Singapore at approximately 0500 hours, despite my declining to apply for Singapore visa, SIA procured 1 month stay visa & whisked me off by their limousine to the Albert Court Hotel, Singapore. Same day SIA Limousine fetched me from the hotel at about 2030 hours and dropped me in the airport. At the SIA's airport counter my boarding card etc. were verified. I was advised to stick around to confirm my flight for New York at approximately 2300 hours. By 2200 hours SIA counter buzzed into action and accordingly I took up position in the queue. Final endorsements, when my Passport (PP) was handed over, I noticed anxious glance and minor a commotion with my PP being tossed around like a hot potato. Abruptly a whiz kid composed himself and he acciously barked out, 'you are a Bangladeshi, so where is your entry visa to Frankfurt, Germany?' I indicated my ticket reading out aloud the destination, Singapore to New York, at the same time reiterating my destination only to 'New York'.

Again the rude crude menacingly barked out 'visa to Frankfurt, Germany?' I realized then that defaulter SIA was passing the buck on me. Politely but firmly, I indicated that this is my second visit to New York and asked whether the flight of SIA was scheduled via Germany. From nowhere an official appeared motioning me to follow him to his office. After pleasantries and re-checking my documents, he confirmed that I was a Bangladeshi when he changed and rudely barked out the same 'Frankfurt visa if you don't wish to be stranded! Politely and very firmly I again countered that my destination is to New York! So is SIA flying via Frankfurt? Realizing that he cannot push me around the SIA, started profusely apologizing blaming SIA Dhaka for their criminal negligence in not verifying my PP at Dhaka sales counter. **He also indicated the mandatory rule imposed by the German authorities requiring Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis to obtain visa even if any airline(s) over fly German air space.**

I politely insisted on a copy of such instructions to submit for rescheduling my meeting, which I will miss tomorrow at 1400 hours on April 03, 1997. After frantic 'Paper Chase' he regretfully told from the flight screen that my flight had already departed. I then politely inquired my fate. He confirmed I could fly via Amsterdam by SIA on April 03, 1997 at ABT 2300 hours. So I requested

for officially issuing me a letter from the SIA.

1. Explicitly stating that, this letter will enable me to reschedule my meeting with my principal in New York. As my April 03 1997 meeting stands invalid, is this not a logical need?

2. Also requested for hotel accommodation and transport as it was nearing midnight and I needed to take rest.

Citing lack of personnel etc.... they declined, ultimately I volunteered to pay for the entire services yet, I was declined and literally escorted out of the SIA office by the security personnel. After frantic efforts I managed

Notes from the Alternatives Desk:

The grievous and pathetic experience of Mr. Salahuddin Yacob jolted the entire alternative team. Therefore we decided to publish the entire letter. The team found both the attitudes of the Singapore airport officials and particularly the reported conditions imposed by the German government on the nationals of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka totally unacceptable. The Centre identified some areas that should be immediately considered by the concerned persons.

First of all the Bangladeshi government should immediately check with the German government about the reported provision. As Sri Lanka is also in the list, both countries can jointly take up the matter. They

can even use the platform of SAARC and thus involve other partners of South Asia as well.

Secondly, on behalf of the civil society particularly the human rights groups should also play a part in denouncing such a shameful provision and demand its withdrawal.

Thirdly, the UNHCR also may look into the matter since, this compulsion of obtaining a visa implies that the nationals of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka cannot seek a refugee status in any European country, if they have to go through Germany. This goes against the rights of the refugees as stipulated in the international conventions.



The flight is delayed: One should be prepared for the tiresome time-passing experience!

—Star photo by Zahidul I Khan

The parting scene: Although commonplace with wage-earners off and on going abroad, but of course touchy when mother and son hug each other and break in tears.

Ensuring a Safe Arrival

Continued from page 6

more problems when they come outside. Specially the chaotic transport system adds to their harassment. Drivers of the baby taxies that stand in line outside airport building are always up on their toes to exploit in the coming passengers. The non-Bangladeshi nationals are their major targets. As there is no fixed rate of taxi fare the amount drivers ask for is far above the normal. One concerned official of the airport informed that even Tk.1500 has been demanded as taxi fare from airport to Gulshan. The taxi drivers at the airport belong to strong groups or the political groups. If one taxi asks for a high amount all others show 'luggage'. The problem turns more acute as the drivers extensively harass the passengers not willing to pay the higher rate of fare. Some drivers literally snatch the baggage of the passengers to compel them to ride on their vehicles. Taking chance of the chaos they sometimes even steal the luggage. The professional hijackers also take advantage of the situation. In sum, the entire system of security outside the airport seems to be in total disarray. There is almost no security for a passenger to exit the airport and reach the destination safe and sound with the entire luggage intact. The police are officially in charge of the security outside. But the less is said about their sense of duty and integrity of character is the better.

There are also stories of passengers, specially the workers from Middle East being cheated in terms of money exchange. In fact these are the people who take the heavier toll of harassment both inside and outside the airport. From the corrupt custom officials to the hijacker outside- all want to have a share in their life long savings and gifts brought for their families and relatives.

The Reception Drama

Not all the problems are caused by the mismanagement by the customs or other officials or by the wicked vehicle drivers. Our tradition of the entire family going to the airport

has been wiser if the entire administrative authority was given to one single body and it appears that the civil aviation body is best placed to take up the charge. In Saudi Arabia the civil aviation is given much more authority over the customs, immigration and other departments which enables it to take more prompt and resolute action regarding charges of malpractice and corruption. On the other side the affected passengers also should firmly proceed with their complaints to the authority.

Bringing in Foreign Companies: For reducing corruption and also for straightening up the administration some recent recommendations were made by the affected passengers regarding exploitation and harassment of the passengers by the transportation at the airport. Firstly, the airport authority should seriously work out terms for a uniform rate of transportation fare with the existing Samitis or impose tax over the amount that the hired vehicle drivers charge from the airport passengers. Secondly, others suggested about introducing a bus service by the airport authorities and that no other transport should be allowed in the area. One civil aviation officer mentioned in this regard that once they tried to introduce metro cabs but it did not materialize due to a strong resistance by the Samitis.

Making things Better
Identification of problems is always much easier than finding the solutions. It is perhaps more difficult here as solutions first of all call for the mitigation of corrupt and unfriendly attitude of the concerned officials. Suggesting a stricter administrative or monitoring system is perhaps a bit out of fashion. The disorders in the airport management are basically the reflection of what is going on in the other institution as well. Who will impose stricter administration is indeed a burning question. Actually if we can not overcome the severe crisis of values and morality that is currently going on in our society, it will surely be very difficult to deal with the huge corruption and malpractice in the airport management.

However, some creative ideas seemed to be existing in the minds of the affected passengers and also of some concerned officials. The application of such ideas may help to improve the condition.

Armed Forces for Airport Security: The recent success of the army in controlling traffic jams in various parts of the city inspired many to propose about deploying the army and air force personnel to look over the security both of the airport and of the passengers. One concerned official suggested that specifically outside the airport there is a dire need of replacing the regular police guards by the armed forces. Most of the policemen deployed here have underhand dealings with the vehicle drivers and reportedly even with some of the anti-social elements. This state of affairs is turning the airport area into a crime zone. Of course there is the risk of undermining the civil authority if the armed forces are involved in too many civil sectors and the latter can also turn corrupt in the process. Let us not forget that this is our airport and we and only we can ensure a safe arrival for us, provided that we can get together. Do we have the will to do so and be together?

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appear to be the only viable alternative. Both the government and the civil society should be seriously thinking about this dilemma.

Fixing Up the Transportation System: Two important recommendations were made by the affected passengers regarding exploitation and harassment of the passengers by the transportation at the airport. Firstly, the airport authority should seriously work out terms for a uniform rate of transportation fare with the existing Samitis or impose tax over the amount that the hired vehicle drivers charge from the airport passengers. Secondly, others suggested about introducing a bus service by the airport authorities and that no other transport should be allowed in the area. One civil aviation officer mentioned in this regard that once they tried to introduce metro cabs but it did not materialize due to a strong resistance by the Samitis. Thus, for working out something new, the obstinate position of the drivers' samiti must be changed. This requires withdrawal of political support from behind- which is actually their main source of strength. But this sort of political maturity seems to be a distant reality.

About the 'Reception Party':

Change in our attitude about going in numbers to receive (or see-off) a person will be helpful in reducing the mismanagement at the airport. We have to realize that if emotions and sentiments cause chaos and sufferings for other people, these may have to be sacrificed. The airport management may also take a decision not to allow more than one to come to receive one passenger. The implementation of such decision will however require a strong and committed authority. And such authority will actually be the key to any improvement of the existing conditions of the airport. Let us not forget that this is our airport and we and only we can ensure a safe arrival for us, provided that we can get together. Do we have the will to do so and be together?

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and they are not barred from going abroad. But it is the common people who suffer most after submitting genuine papers and documents to the diplomatic missions.

Mending the System:
Recommendations
Many of the respondents we talked with advised to take some immediate measures in this respect. The Alternative team thinks that the hazards associated with granting visa can be reduced in the following ways:

Collecting Visa Forms- Reducing the Hazards
The intention of a visa form is to procure basic information about the persons wishing to visit abroad. Many of the questions in the form actually have very little relevance. The composition of questions of a form should be made in such a way so that on the one hand these can procure some basic facts about the claimant, at the same time these do not appear as test questions to the visa seekers.

Harassment While Granting a Visa
Harassment in the issuance of visa is a common complaint. Most of the claimants of British visa alleged that there is one particular person in the High Commission who unnecessarily creates problems. In another case, an applicant for US student visa complained that even after having all the necessary papers for admission, his visa was refused for the first two times. The claimants thus maintained that those who want to migrate have thousands ways to deceive

the diplomatic missions.

Finding a "Good" Place and Increasing the Number of Counters
The diplomatic missions should arrange a proper place for the claimants.

Bangladeshi tourists:
"For Bangladeshi nationals, passports have become liabilities these days"—one of the respondents expressed his deep frustration while talking about the hazards associated with obtaining visa. There is a widely shared view abroad as well as among the foreign embassies within Bangladesh, that Bangladeshi nationals want to migrate permanently and such opinion is having a profound negative impact upon the process of latter's obtaining visas. Certainly some of them want to get rid of their miserable economic condition in the country and want to migrate for a better living; but not all of them. The diplomatic missions should understand this fact and therefore stop harassing all the claimants indiscriminately.

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The topic of the next issue is "Political Protest: Search for Alternatives." Scholars, researchers, activists and all other interested parties at home and abroad are requested to send their articles to Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No. 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Faculty, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (880-2) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net