

One-stop passport service boon for applicants

Centres at post office, bank prove competence in a month

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

When Mushfiqur Rahman set off from his home on an overcast Monday, he thought it was going to be a rowdy morning.

He would turn up at the General Post Office (GPO) on the way to his office and submit the application form for his new passport. With an hour spent on the queue at the GPO, he should reach office by 10:00am -- an hour later than the usual office hour, Rahman thought bitterly.

But he cannot help doing so. He desperately needed the passport for the upcoming foreign tour from the office.

To his surprise, Rahman reached his office by 9:00am as his time spent at the GPO barely lasted for five minutes.

"I was quite amazed," said Rahman. "I heard stories from my friends and relatives how they spent hours, days after days, taking the trouble to stand in queues just to submit the application form at Agargaon passport office."

"But in my case I just went to the GPO counter that deals with passport applications. I handed over the application documents and the money. The clerk at the counter did some paperwork and gave me a slip with a delivery date," he said, "the whole procedure took only a few minutes."

Apparently, the postal department has been able to win the confidence of a good number of passport seekers in its first month of working as an agent of Department of Immigration and Passport.

When the passport authorities announced its collaboration with the postal services earlier, many people expressed scepticism about the department's ability to conduct the important responsibility of distributing passports.

However, a little over a month later, many of those cynics say they are satisfied with the service.

Mozammel Hossain, a resident of Paribagh, said, "Two years ago I had to get my father's passport processed as we were planning to take him abroad for medical treatment. Only after series of trouble-



Applicants approaching the one-stop passport service at GPO, where they no longer have to take the trouble to wait long tiring hours.

some work, were we able to get the passport."

"Now I have no complaints. This time I had to spend around 15 minute in total at the local sub-post office to obtain his passport. And I got it only 15 days after I applied for," he said.

The postal department started its one-stop passport services in 12 post offices and sub post offices in the city on September 24.

The post offices and sub post offices at General Post Office (GPO), Sadar Post Office, Demra, Cantonment, Mirpur-2, New Market, Uttara, Mohammadpur, Gulshan, Banani and Wari have special counters that deal with passport-related services.

Applicants can collect application forms, submit the form along with the required charge and collect passport on due date from the same counter.

A service charge of Tk 200 is to be paid for the purpose.

"You get all the services in one place. That is why, the service is called one-stop passport service," said Harunur Rashid, senior postmaster of Dhaka GPO.

Seventeen branches of Trust Bank are also operating special counters for one-stop passport services.

"Honestly speaking, when I first heard about it, I was surprised. Why should they [passport authorities] want the postal department, one of most inefficient and sluggish government bodies, to handle a delicate matter like passport," said Faisal Hossain, a resident of Dhanmondi.

"I was rather worried because I had to get passport for my young daughter. But the postal department did not disappoint me. Everything went on smoothly," he said.

After the passport department signed contracts with the postal department and a private bank under the Passport Agent Licensing Act 2007, a

section of passport officials have expressed fear that the passport issuance procedure with the commercial bank and post office may increase the chance of fake applicants getting Bangladeshi passport.

Authenticity of the applicants remains questionable as they appear before post office and bank officials who are not experienced in passport and immigration matters, they said.

However, several passport officials said chances of fraudulence are minimal.

"The bank and post offices are just receiving the fees and application, and distributing the passports. It is still the passport authority that is responsible for issuing the passport," said an official at Department of Immigration and Passport.

"If there are any discrepancies in the application forms, it is expected that we would be able to identify it," said the official requesting anonymity.

Sources at the postal department said, they are receiving around 150 to 160 passport applications daily in the 12 post offices and sub post offices in the capital.

"All the applications submitted to the post offices are sent to the General Post Office, from where they are sent off to the passport office for processing," said Harunur Rashid. "So far the response has been satisfactory. And we hope to continue the service at a good pace," he added.

"As the new scheme is still at its early stage chances of some minor discrepancies in the process are not unlikely. We hope things will get better in future," said Nazrul Islam, deputy director (Administration) of Department of Immigration and Passports.

As per the contract with the Department of Immigration and Passport, 64 head post offices throughout the country are working as passport agent for the department.

Low-cost housing planned for slum dwellers

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

A low-cost housing project has been undertaken under the joint initiative of the government and NGOs for slum dwellers and low-income people of the city.

Several six-storey buildings will be built on five acres of land in Mirpur in the city. Each buildings will have several 600 square feet flats.

The National Housing Authority (NHA) is now processing handover of the land at Bastuhara in Mirpur Section-11 for the experimental project.

Coalition for Urban Poor (CUP), an umbrella body of some non-government organisations (NGO), will supervise construction and selling of the flats among the slum dwellers and low-income people.

Nurul Islam, executive engineer of NHA Dhaka Division-1 said they have already demarcated the land and sent documents to the higher authorities for approval.

NHA has asked CUP for taking possession of the land allotted for the housing scheme.

Mostafa Quaium, executive director of CUP, said the steering committee on rehabilitation of slum dwellers sought 120 acres of land for rehabilitating at least 12,000 urban poor but the government provided only 5 acres.

He said a tripartite lease agreement will be signed between the NHA, CUP and the fortunate slum dwellers before handover of the flats.

Design of the apartments has not been finished yet. "We are looking forward to get the land first and then we will finalise the number of buildings," Mostafa said.

The steering committee planned to construct finished houses so that slum dwellers could afford it, but the government approved 600 sq feet flats, he added.

He said CUP is expecting to rehabilitate about 2,000 families on the 5 acres of land.

As the government failed to provide fund for the project, CUP will find donors like UN Habitat, Asian Development Bank for construction of the flats after handover of the land.

"We are not looking for any

commercial investor," Mostafa said.

About payment mode for these flats, Mostafa said slum dwellers would get 15 to 20 years to pay the price for their flats.

About 30,000 families were evicted from over 50 slums in Dhaka through drives between 2003 and the middle of 2007, according to estimation of CUP.

Those eviction drives caused damage worth about Tk 34 crore displacing thousands of families. Twenty-two drives were conducted in 2007 under the caretaker government.

Mostafa said that these eviction drives would have grave impact on the life of the middle class and upper class families because most of these evicted people provide different kinds of services to the city dwellers.

Moreover, slum eviction increases the number of floating population in the city.

Housing problem of urban poor is getting an acute shape in the city as a large number of poor and working people are migrating to the city regularly from the rural areas, he said.



With little access to basic amenities, slums dwellers live in most unhygienic condition. The picture was taken from a slum in Mohammadpur Beribandh area.

STAR PHOTO

Terrible traffic jam chokes Mirpur-10 roundabout

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Terrible traffic jam at Mirpur Section-10 roundabout has become a headache for the residents of the Mirpur-Pallabi area, one of the most densely populated areas of the city.

The gridlock that chokes the intersection from all directions almost the whole day is causing immense sufferings to the commuters.

Residents complained that office-goers have to waste a lot of time during office hours. The traffic jam gets even worse from 7:00pm and it lasts till 11:00pm when most people return home from work.

Shamim Ahsan, a resident of West Manipur working with a cellphone company said, "I face the jam when I go to office in the morning every day. I am forced to waste around 45 minutes at the intersection."

"Buses pick up passengers in a very haphazard manner occupying every side of the

intersection, contributing to the jam. Another problem is hawkers sometimes occupy the street as well as footpath," he added.

Sanjida Akter, a student of Eden College living near Pallabi Police Station, said she faces trouble while going back home in the evening.

"The jam stretches from Kazipara to Mirpur Section-10 roundabout in the evening. Vehicles move at a snail's pace. It becomes unbearable as I am so near my home yet it takes around an hour to get home from the intersection."

The Section-10 intersection is the main entry point to Mirpur-Pallabi area. Mirpur covers about 53.58 sq km area while Pallabi is situated on 17 sq km area. Apart from accommodating residential houses, the area has also become a major commercial district and garment industry belt.

Around 15 lakh people living in the areas including

Senpara Parbata, Pirebagh, East and West Monipur, Nam Colony, Benaroshi Palli, Stadium Para, Rupnagar, Milk Vita, Duaripara, Pallabi, Pallabi extension, Kazipara and Kafrul are seriously affected by the jam.

Mofiz Uddin Ahmed, DC traffic (West) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said every intersection of the city is troublesome for traffic department but in Mirpur-10 many factors contribute to a serious congestion.

He mentioned that haphazardly parked buses and rickshaws as well as hawkers swarming the area are two major reasons. Another reason is several waste containers set up on the street near the intersection.

"It is definitely not the right place to set up waste bins. Every evening community waste collectors from different areas dispose of waste in the dumpsters from their vans occupying a major part of the

street," he said. "The intersection is off limits to rickshaws. So rickshaws coming from Senpara Parbata regularly take the wrong side of the street going against the traffic flow in the one-way road, which is another major reason," he added.

Moreover, CNG-run vehicles queue up in the street for refilling by gas stations located near the intersection, causing more congestion.

Mainuddin, executive engineer, zone 7 of Dhaka City Corporation, said, "DCC is planning to set up a mini waste-transfer station near Section-10 roundabout. A place has been selected. The dumpsters will be removed from the street as soon as the waste transfer station is built."

Islam however said that the selected spot is currently occupied illegally by some fruit vendors. Steps have been taken to evict them, he said.



Unaware of the danger that she would face from a train approaching from behind, a hearing impaired woman walks on a rail track near Karwan Bazar rail crossing. People living in the slums bordering the rail tracks are used to ignoring such risks while people with disabilities are more prone to accidents. The picture was taken seconds before she was tugged by someone from the rail tracks.

SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN