A MOMENT OF PRIDE

THE HON'BLE PRIME MINISTER LAUNCHES MRTD TODAY

A GIANT STEP TOWARDS DIGITAL BANGLADESH...

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Tan Sri Razali Ismail
Chairman, IRIS Corporation Berhad

Congratulations

On the occasion of the launching ceremony of the Bangladesh Machine Readable Passport (MRP), we at IRIS Corporation Berhad would like to express our heartiest congratulations to the government to the People's Republic of Bangladesh and to the citizens of Bangladesh.

IRIS is grateful for the honour to work hand in hand with the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The IRIS JV is extremely proud to partner the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Department of Immigration And Passports in its national project to transition from traditional hand written passports to International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Compliant Machine Readable Travel Documents (MRTD).

This launch ceremony marks yet another momentous step by your nation towards a Digital Bangladesh under the progressive leadership of Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Honorable Prime Minster. Additionally, Bangladesh also ushers in an era of increased Commitment towards the integrity and security of the Bangladesh passport.

As a global citizen, it is IRIS' lifelong commitment to share expertise which support and empower communities with creative yet beneficial solutions for everyday life in an ever changing world. As solutions and service provider, inventor and manufacturer, IRIS fervently aspires to collaborate with the local governments and business communities across Bangladesh towards greater regional partnerships.

Md. Asifuzzaman
Managing Director, dataedge Limited

Learning from Successful Public Sector Projects in Bangladesh

When we started our journey as a small business house in 2002, with all of us being professionals-turned-businessmen with no experience of running businesses in the family, we were both very optimistic as well as apprehensive! We received a whole lot of advices from our well-wishers such as "Go for Government projects, big money and you rarely have to deliver anything!" or to the other extreme, "Never get into a Government Project, the sign-off will take 10 years"! Naturally neither extreme suited our taste or vision, and for the first few years of dataedge life, we never even considered vying for government projects.
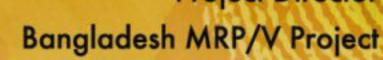
Then in 2006-2007, as a test case, we finally competed in a Government Infrastructure Project RFP for SICT for the Planning Commission of Bangladesh, a long-standing requirement supposedly once tried some 10 years back with a global giant but which met with a complete failure! We were apprehensive even when we were awarded the job. We finished the job well in time and still supporting the same. We grew in confidence, so in 2008, we participated in another opportunity funded by DFID, though not strictly a government project but the end user being the Central Bank of Bangladesh. We won the project ahead of some foreign competitors and started very cautiously. The project was of much bigger size, perhaps one of the biggest and most complex in the history of IT industry in Bangladesh. Several attempts to initiate the project had failed before and we have had our distracters saying until this day that the project will be a failure, although their numbers are diminishing at a very fast pace! And then came the milestone project of Machine Readable Passport and VISA, possibly the benchmark IT project in the country for years to come. The project awarded with strict ICAO deadlines looming on the horizon, we and our JV partners still managed to start the work within stipulated deadlines!

I am sure there is no common recipe for success in government projects, but from our experience, I believe the following factors are what made us successful:

1. Clear definition of all stock-holders of the project and their buy-in from Day 1 of the award of the project, and perhaps identification of the detractors!

2. A strong project team from client side who can provide quick decisions – the decisions do not have to be always right! No project, even in government sector, can be run democratically!

3. Clear, transparent communications between client and vendor as all times of the project, however negative the situation is.

4. Client and vendor's desire to walk the extra miles in terms of investment (and not look at only the bottom-line) whenever the project calls for – and such complex projects usually calls for a lot of extra miles!

5. Occasionally the capability of the vendor to innovate & diversify to circumvent unforeseen challenges.

6. Meeting deadlines strictly at ALL costs – sometimes one slippage may have an avalanche effect on the whole project

While we thank our well-wishers for their valuable suggestions at the start of our journey, the above projects have made us believe that Government Projects may indeed be successful, viable and effective. And whatever the myth says, there are plenty of capable, strong, passionate and patriotic personnel in the Government Sector who work for the greater good of the country, we just need to involve them. The natural definition, in a country like Bangladesh, automation in Government Sector can bring in much greater goods to vast majority of the population than private sector projects can. With the world growing at a lightning pace, and the government's timely vision of a Digital Bangladesh, we foresee a lot of successful Automation Projects in Government Sector, enabling the Government to be the service provider of choice to the people of the country. dataedge, of course will continue to look forward to pioneering more innovative projects for the country and the government and breaking into new frontiers!

Brigadier General Md Refayet Ullah, afwc, psc
Project Director
Bangladesh MRP/V Project

The Past, Present, and Future of Passports: Are We on the Right Track ?

A passport is a national identity document issued by the Government of a country. The holder of a passport uses it as an international travel document that certifies the holder's identity when the passport holder crosses the immigration and visits foreign lands.

The paper-based handwritten passport (e.g., our current Bangladeshi passport) has been the most common and stable form of passports for many years. However, passports issued by different countries were different from each other as there was no universally accepted standard until 1980. Traditional hand-written passports have the following major shortcomings: (i) can be easily forged, (ii) require manual processing and matching, thus often results in delays in the immigration process, (iii) having different formats, the inter-operability among the countries was a major problem.

To mitigate all these problems, after many years of discussions, in 1980, International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) finally standardizes and modernizes the format of the passport. They have also given the guidelines to store auxiliary data (which are optional) in various formats to keep pace with technological evolution.

A well-accepted standard which is now followed by the most of the countries worldwide is known as Machine Readable Passports (MRP). Intuitively, an MRP is a travel document that contains all the necessary data of a person in one of the pages (also called machine readable zone or MRZ) readable by a machine or Optical Character Reader (OCR).

Since MRPs have a sequence of lines that can be swiped/scanned by immigration officers, the passport holder's identity can be quickly verified. With one fast swipe, front line officers can pull up the information that they need to process legitimate travelers quickly. At the same time, this immediate information access will enable our officers to focus even more on identifying potential threats. Therefore, MRP provides the following advantages: (i) faster and reliable processing and verifying the passengers' data by immigration officers, (ii) greater protection against fraudulent misuse and tampering, and (iii) the reduced risk of identity fraud.

If an MRP has an embedded contactless chip, which contains data about the passport holder, a photograph (and fingerprints) in digital format, and data about the passport itself, then the travel document is known as an e-Passport. Many countries now issue e-Passports, where the main objective for the e-passports is to speed up clearance through immigration and the prevention of identity fraud, as theoretically it does not require any human intervention in the total process.

Although many countries issue e-Passports, few have introduced the equipments needed to read them at the ports of entry. Moreover, different loop-holes and security breaches in the associated technologies for e-passports have been discovered in recent years. By realizing the increasing threat of forgery and misuse of passports, most of the countries who issued e-passports still prefer to check the passengers manually as done with the MRP.

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that though e-passports have been emerged in recent years as a promising technology, it is still in its infancy. However, I believe that this technology will become more stable in near future. Naturally, the question that came to my mind is, if a country adopts the MRP, is it possible to adopt e-passports technologies when the necessity arises? The answer is yes. This is because an e-Passport is just an addition of a new technology in the MRP. In the MRP all information are digitized and stored in a paper-based media; on the other hand, in an e-Passport, the same information is still kept in paper based format, in addition, the same information (mandatory) and some extra biometric identity information (optional) are stored in a small chip. This chip is then embedded or attached to an MRP, and eventually the MRP becomes an e-Passport.

So far we have discussed the past and present state of passports. But what will be the form of future passports? We have seen unprecedented technological development in recent years. Thus it is very natural that the technology exists today will definitely be replaced by more sophisticated technology in future. So the form of passports is also bound to change. Therefore, irrespective of technological evolution, the common and most important thing that we need in future is a national database that contains updated biographical, biometric, and historical information of every citizen of the country. The national database will not only benefit us to easily adopt new technological change for the future passports, it will pave the way to build the foundation of each and every national project (ranging from an agricultural data management system to a crime data management system) that involves the citizens of the country.

In the MRP project, we have already started collecting and storing all necessary information (biographical, biometric, and historical) of a person for issuing an MRP. Soon the citizens of our country will enjoy a hassle free travel abroad by using the MRP, which was a dream of any individual just a few months back. I hope this project will also serve as a good starting point of the realization of our future national database. Therefore, in all aspects, the introduction of MRP is an important milestone for our nation and was the most pragmatic decision of the government.

Syed Ahsan Habib
CEO, MRP Project
Tusuka Technotrade Limited

"Yes, We can!"

After a frantic scramble over a month and a half to meet a daunting deadline, Bangladesh has reached a notable landmark — the first machine-readable passport has been handed over to an applicant. This is a technological breakthrough worth celebrating.

With the introduction of Machine Readable Travel Documents (MRTD), Bangladesh crossed an important threshold in advanced technology. MRTDs represent the cutting edge of state-of-the-art security technology. In these troubled times, with global terror threats presenting increasing risk in international travel, conventional Bangladeshi passports that were issued until now are no longer considered secure enough, and ICAO had given an ultimatum to Bangladesh to introduce travel documents with sophisticated safeguards to ensure that Bangladeshis could travel abroad without hindrance.

In my role as one of the key enablers in realizing the ambitious program to introduce MRTDs, I had a privileged perch. Let me share some of the insights I gained.

One cannot commend highly enough our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's farsighted vision of a Digital Bangladesh. In today's fast-moving globalized world, bringing Bangladesh up to the speed on information technology is critical if we wish to tap the vast opportunities offered by the global economy.

To be sure, the MRTD technology per se is not indigenous. An international consortium of companies from nations as far apart as Poland and Malaysia came together under our aegis to bring this project to fruition. Having said that, this is a significant breakthrough for the nation. For our MRP project team which brought this challenging project to reality, it's been a tough, stressful, but ultimately exhilarating and rewarding ride.

April 1, 2010 was the ICAO deadline to introduce MRTD, thus bringing down the curtain on traditional handwritten passports. The tender was floated on September 15, 2009 and bids were received in the last week of October 2009. Though the target was to award the contract by the first week of December 2009 but due to reasons best known to the authority the work order was awarded to us, the lowest responsive bidder, only on February 17, 2010.

We had all of 42 days to put in place a system in a nation which issues over two million passports per year, while at the same time ensuring that the passports met the most exacting security standards. And, we did it. It was a tough ask, but the most rewarding part of our experience was how several key people stepped up to the plate and helped us meet a daunting challenge. Credit is due to too many people to allow mentioning them all, so here are just a few people of the many without whose passion and commitment the project would not have been successful.

Project Director Brigadier General Md. Refayet Ullah's motivation has been exemplary; Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder brought a committed determination to navigate through any and all hurdles at full speed; Abdul Mabud, the energetic Director General of the Department of Immigration and Passports, gave us his unstinting support. Crucial to our efforts was the Prime Minister's robust backing, empowering the team to meet the challenge, cutting through bureaucratic red tapes.

The private arm of the project, IRIS JV, is comprised of Malaysia's IRIS Corporation Berhad, Poland's PWPW, and Bangladesh's Dataedge Limited. A local conglomerate, Tusuka Technotrade Limited was the catalyst behind the entire venture.

A dedicated team raced against time to complete a complicated and demanding project that included designing of the passport booklets and visa stickers, air-freighting in and installing the required machinery, linking the regional passport offices by optical fibers, and training carefully recruited and screened manpower to run the project flawlessly. It would be unfair on my part if I don't mention my teammates - Noor Chowdhury of dataedge, Quik Choo of IRIS, Ziggy Matera of PWPW and Tawfiq Hasan of Tusuka – the people who worked ungodly hours through difficult conditions only to meet the ICAO deadline absolutely on-time and thus helped our Hon'ble Prime Minister fulfill her pledge to her citizens.

Bangladesh is not the first country that springs to mind when one thinks of a nation where a complex, cutting-edge system for a high tech passport and visa system can be put in place in 42 days flat. Yet that's exactly what we did.

This is a moment of pride for Bangladesh. One is tempted to borrow the rallying cry of U.S. President Barack Obama's election campaign: "Yes, We can!"

IRIS JV PARTNERS

We are proud to put the TEAM together in making the History.

TUSUKA Technotrade Limited