Trapped in Karachi Airport

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In December 1973, the first high level trade delegation from Bangladesh led by then Minister of Commerce and Foreign Trade, A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman visited the Soviet Union at the invitation of his counterpart. The delegation comprised of six Bangladeshi officials, including myself. I was the Minister's Private Secretary, and the junior most member of the delegation. This is not a narrative, however, of either the trade talks between the two delegations in a harsh Russian winter or a description of my wonder eyed view of Moscow monuments and grand avenues. This is about an unintended by product of that visit to the Soviet Union—a forced landing in Karachi, Pakistan that led to our being stranded in that country for nearly 24 hours.

The route to Moscow was via Delhi in those days. From Dhaka we took an Indian Airlines flight to Delhi, and thereafter we were aboard an Aeroflot Jet–the official airline of the Soviet Union to Moscow via Tehran. This was before Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh and at a time when Bangladesh was seriously pursuing the idea of trying a number of Pakistani Army officers as war criminals. All said this was not a good moment for a band of Bangladeshi government officials headed by a senior Minister to be in a country that was still seething in angst for the loss of its eastern part. But that was our lot as our plane on way to Delhi had to make an emergency landing at Karachi because our destination airport was inaccessible due to dense fog.

The plane landed in Karachi sometime after midnight, but we would not know about it until after landing. Such diversions due to bad weather are not unknown, and most passengers received the news in their stride, except us—the few Bangladeshis on board. The news particularly bothered the head of our delegation –the Minister who worried being in a country that was still hostile to Bangladesh even though his presence in Pakistani territory was completely accidental. But he was assured by the pilot that he expected the plane to leave Karachi in a matter of a couple of hours when Delhi's sky cleared up. Little did we know at that time how those two hours would stretch to nearly twenty four by the time we could leave Karachi.

With assurance from the pilot of our leaving Karachi in another two hours most of us went back to sleep since it was still deep in the night. When I woke up I found that it was bright outside and more perplexingly I discovered that we were still aground. When I looked through my window I saw the plane was parked near the Air terminal with the name "Karachi International Airport" illuminated at the top. I also saw a few uniformed police men standing guard near the plane. Alarmed, I stood up and went to speak with a flight attendant. In broken English the flight attendant told me that for bad weather the plane could not take off, and he did not know when it would. But in any case the crew would serve us breakfast, as if that was what we cared about most. I looked at my watch and found out that we had been already in Karachi for over four hours.

The Minister's fears were that the longer the plane remained in Karachi the greater were the chances that the Pakistani authorities would learn about his presence at the airport.

It was not an easy task to report back to the Minister the state of play, in particular the uncertainty of our departure for Delhi. The four other members of the delegation conferred with the Minister, but there was very little they could do to allay his worries. The Minister's fears were that the longer the plane remained in Karachi the greater were the chances that the Pakistani authorities would learn about his presence at the airport. Even though I felt that my boss's fears were somewhat exaggerated, my seniors thought that the Pakistani journalists could cause problems if any of them came to know about a Bangladeshi Minister's presence in a Pakistani airport, however accidental the circumstances were.

A cold breakfast served later was literally cold