comfort for us since the crew could not give us a time for our departure. A little later we were told by the pilot that as the departure was uncertain, the authorities of the airport had agreed to let the passengers to go and rest in the transit lounge where they could get hot food also. This alarmed the Minister further as he was certain that the moment we set foot on official Pakistani soil we would expose ourselves and be subject to any kind of harassment . When I asked what type of harassment he feared, the Minister looked at me sternly and said that officially we were members of a rebel government as Pakistan had yet to recognise Bangladesh as a sovereign government. We informed the Aeroflot crew we would not leaving the plane since the option was ours. The Pilot agreed given that the Minister was à VIP guest of the Soviet government. One by one all other passengers left the plane leaving only six Bangladeshis cooped up in a Soviet Jet Airliner. We were afraid that Pakistani authorities could hold us hostage when they found out our identity. We were warned by the crew that we would have to eat whatever the crew could provide from a depleted pantry. We would soon discover how depleted it was.



A meagre lunch was provided at midday that consisted of some black bread, hard cheese and an apple. A little later we saw some civilian officials entering the plane and conferring with the flight crew. We heard some arguments of some sort with papers being handed over to the pilot. When I asked the same English–speaking flight attendant what the discussion was about I was bewildered to hear that the discussion was about fuel bills between Karachi Airport officials and the pilot. Apparently, Aeroflot had suspended operations to Pakistan and this plane was the first to land in Pakistan after the suspension. The Karachi Airport authority was now insisting on payment of old bills due to the fuel supplier. We then realised that our departure was not just delayed by bad weather but also unpaid bills! At one point, the pilot left the plane with the officials leaving us in a greater state of worry.

Meanwhile, life in the narrow confines of the jet was becoming more difficult. Our hunger increased in direct proportion to our anxiety. The pantry had really been depleted to servings of stale apple and dry biscuits. The toilets which had not been emptied in the last twenty four hours began to release unbearable odours. And the pilot had not returned. We wondered whether we would be better off in the more open space of the airport even if it meant incarceration by Pakistan government. The short winter day soon became dark again, and we had no dinner to look forward to, or any chance of departure from Karachi.

There was no dinner, but more alarmingly there was no pilot either. The English –speaking attendant was also not at hand. Apparently he had gone to the terminal building. Another attendant sat in the galley looking very sulky. I walked by him to see if he could give us any food. He pointed to the nearly empty pantry where a few cans of fruit juice and dry biscuits lay in one corner. I helped myself to a can of juice. From there in the first class cabin I saw my minister lying in his couch covered head to foot in a blanket. My other colleagues were also lying inert in their seats. In that dark galley of an aging Aeroflot Jet I wondered how many more hours we would have to spend. Delhi seemed very far indeed!

We did however survive that ordeal. The first sign that things were probably heading the right direction was the return of a happy pilot to the plane. He headed to the cockpit straight away. Then came a smiling flight attendant informing us that the plane had permission to fly. Soon the passengers who had taken shelter in the transit lounge poured back one by one looking well fed. It was close to midnight local time by the time the plane took off. We did not care nor ask for any warm food. We were just happy that we were finally leaving Karachi and our nightmarish ordeal was coming to an end. The Minister, who had covered himself with a blanket all these past hours, threw it aside and smilingly asked "are we finally taking off? " I nodded yes. We reached Dhaka a day later.

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