

TIME TO GO?

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Sara Ansari is delighted. She can finally drive in her own country thanks to a recent change in reforms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The changes have just begun to take effect; Sara, however, has been holding a license for a couple of years. She got it from Saudi Arabia's neighbouring country, Bahrain, and would go there every weekend, just to drive around and have a good time.

"Driving is fun. I am glad that people have realised it and will allow it here. I can't wait to drive to work," she says ecstatically. Allowing women to drive isn't the only change that the kingdom is going to delve into this year; several other modifications are about to hit the country.

For one, Saudis won't have to travel all the way to Bahrain just to watch a movie in the cinema. After a 35-year ban, the government has finally decided to allow commercial movie-theatre licenses. As a result, a number of malls in the country are now working on building cinemas, and quickly too.

Sara, who lives in Al-Khobar, says that the closest mall to her house, Al-Rashid Mall, has already begun constructing 17 cinemas. They are due to be completed soon.

In addition to all of this, the government has also decided to begin issuing tourist visas this year. Yes, that's right, until 2018, it wasn't possible for tourists to get access to the kingdom. Visas were previously given to people only for work or for the purpose of visiting holy sites. However, with this new move, investment in building resorts to attract tourists has increased.

The above changes made headlines all around the world and were welcomed emphatically. However, the country is also going through a number of other changes—changes that have drastically affected the expatriates of the country, changes that haven't quite been spoken of.

According to the country's General Authority for Statistics (GaStat), more than 94,000 expat workers left the Kingdom between July to September last year. The latest numbers are expected to be a lot higher.

One of the main reasons why a number of expats are leaving is because of the imposition of dependents' fees and foreign workers' levies. According to the new rules, companies which have hired more expats than locals will have to pay 400 Saudi Riyals (SR) per worker to the government. On the other hand, companies, which have an equal number of expatriate and local workers, will have to pay SR 300 per worker this year.

This cost will increase in the coming days. The companies that are paying SR 400 this year will have to pay SR 600 in 2019 and SR 800 in 2020. Similarly, the other group of companies will have to pay SR 500 in 2019 and SR 700 in 2020.

And it does not just end there. For every dependent that the worker has—for instance, the worker's wife or child—the worker will have to pay SR 200 per month in 2018. In 2019, that number will increase to SR 300 per month per dependent.

What this basically means is that if you are an expat family of four in Saudi Arabia, you will have to pay SR 1,100 or BDT 25,000 every month to the government.

Abul Faisal, originally from Chittagong, has been working in the Kingdom for more than two decades now. He lives in Al-Khobar, located in the Eastern Province and works as an accountant for an insurance company.

He explains that many Bangladeshi workers are sending their families back home in order to avoid paying the dependents' fee. "My company has told me that they will bear all my costs. However, that will definitely have an impact on my salary. If they are paying for me and my wife, they will balance out their spending from my salary," he says

According to Faisal, he can already feel the impact on his monthly salary. "For now, my company has decreased the money that it used to give me for my air-ticket back home every year by 50 percent. I don't know what's going to

| MIGRATION |



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



Expats wait in line to get their residency permit renewed PHOTOS: STAR FILE

Mohammad Sarwar Alam, counselor of the Bangladesh Embassy in Saudi Arabia, admits that the changes have made it difficult for Bangladeshi expats to continue living in the kingdom. "It has definitely made an impact. The costs have increased and unless you earn around SR 10,000 per month, it will be difficult for you to stay here with your families.

happen next," he says.

Faisal's case is just one example. There are several companies that are planning to deduct the expat levy fee from the employers' salaries.

The decrease in salary is accompanied with a five percent tax on all goods that are purchased. There has also been an increase in water and electricity bills. Fazlul Karim, a resident of Dammam, says that he was compelled to shift to a smaller house so he could continue to afford sending money home to Dhaka.

"I am practically at work all day. My home is empty till evening and there's no electricity usage. Despite that, my electricity bill has nearly doubled in the last few months. How can my bill double if I am not even spending time at home?" he asks.

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costs have increased and unless you earn around SR 10,000 per month, it will be difficult for you to stay here with your families. As a result, many families are leaving the country," he says.

"It's not just Bangladeshi. People from other countries are facing a similar problem. This is a part of their Saudisation process. It has also affected the international schools over here. Many parents are sending their children back home," he adds.

Due to the huge exodus, teachers from schools have already begun asking parents whether or not their children would continue their studies there. The exodus of foreigners, in addition, has also led to a decrease in house rent in a number of areas, according to a report published by the *Saudi Gazette*, a national newspaper. The housing sector, according to the report, has been badly affected.

The impact has been worse for those who are involved in businesses over there. That's because expats have been restricted from 12 areas of

work from this year onwards. They cannot work in watch shops, optical stores, medical equipment stores, electrical and electronics shops, outlets selling car spare part, building material shops, outlets selling all types of carpets, automobile and mobile shops, shops selling home furniture and ready-made office material, sale outlets of ready-made garments, children clothes and men's supplies, household utensils shops and pastry shops.

One who has been to Saudi Arabia will easily tell you that shops selling clothes, pastries or electronics have long employed Bangladeshis and other expatriates to run them. The ban, according to the Bangladesh embassy, has had an adverse impact on Bangladeshi workers.

45-year-old Golam Uddin has been selling clothes at a shop in Dammam since 1996. Following these changes though, Golam does not know if he will be able to continue living in the Kingdom. "As per the new rule, we are not allowed to sell women's ready-made clothes. Only Saudis are allowed to do that now. It's difficult to earn as much as before because that's the product that used to get sold the most," explains Golam.

"There's a strict vigilance. Every other day these inspectors from the government come to the shops to check what we are selling. I have changed my products. Now I only sell children's clothes. But six months later, I don't even know if I will be allowed to sell that. There's a lot of confusion among expatriates here," he adds.

41-year-old Mehedi Rahman narrates a similarly distressing tale. He has been involved in the car rental business. He ran three cars in partnership with a Saudi owner and would live on his share. However, now that women are allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, his owner decided that the owner's wife would use the cars, leaving Mehedi all of a sudden, without any source of income.

"I spent a lot of money to come here in the first place. I have not even managed to break even, considering all the loans that I had taken to get a visa to come to Saudi. The situation is quite desperate, honestly speaking. I don't know what I will do next," says Mehedi.

With the fees and expenses likely to increase, Bangladeshi expats like Mehedi and Faisal will have to quickly decide what steps they are going to take in the coming days. The decision isn't likely to be easy. People like Faisal have been living abroad for more than two decades and for him to leave the country all of a sudden will be difficult. For people like Mehedi, who have sold lands and taken loans in order to go to Saudi Arabia in the first place, it's going to be a lot more difficult.

What's also going to be interesting to see is how quickly the majority of the Saudi population can replace the expats. After all, it's not just a case of reforms. The issue of training and skill development also becomes highly important. ■

| CITY |

A city that had over 50 canals and lakes only three decades ago, Dhaka has currently lost almost all of its water bodies. Over the years, most of these water bodies have been snatched by land grabbers and some have been used to dump massive quantities of garbage from nearby areas. Last December, although the High Court ordered the government to demarcate the areas occupied by these canals so that steps could be taken to return them to their original shape, no significant measures have been taken yet to re-excavate, demarcate and properly monitor their condition.

One such canal is located near Nobodoy Housing in the capital's Adabor area, where six-year-old Jisan, the son of Abul Hashem, alias Hashu Mia, lost his life after falling into it last Friday. To add to the tragedy, even though some locals saw him fall into the canal, they were unable to rescue him because of the density of the garbage that was dumped into the water body. It took a

Razzak claims that the city corporation is not the concerned authority for canals and that WASA is responsible.

When asked about the dumping of solid waste into the canals, the DNCC CWMO replied that it is a bad habit of the public. "I have not been informed that the city corporation waste collectors dump waste into canals, because our collectors bring waste to our own dumping stations," he alleges.

On the contrary, when contacted, Engr. Taqsem A Khan, Managing Director, Dhaka WASA asserts that the canals are under the jurisdiction of the District Commissioner. From 2005, however, with finance from the World Bank, Dhaka WASA has been working on different projects to improve the conditions of some of Dhaka's canals. Adabor canal was not a part of any of these projects, he informs.

When asked about who was responsible for maintenance of the canal in question, he says, "I'm not

to pay BDT 10 lakh each within 90 days.

"Despite the HC's order, the authorities have not paid the money yet. I have sent a legal notice to the officials on January 22. As they did not reply to the notice we have asked the court's attention for their contempt of court. I'm working on this case to make it a precedent for the development of public law compensation in the judicial system of Bangladesh," says Barrister Halim.

"In Jisan's case, if the city corporation is the owner of the canal or responsible as a concerned authority for its maintenance, and there is any locality near it, this body of government is legally obligated to make proper defence and arrangement, so that children or any other human being is not endangered or somehow fall into the canal and get killed. The city corporation will not be able to avoid this liability," he adds.

Barrister Halim has so far filed 12 such cases regarding deaths due to negligence, but on most

WATER BODIES OR DEATH TRAPS?

NILIMA JAHAN

five-hour operation for firefighters—similarly hampered by the volume of waste material—to recover his body.

Jisan was playing cricket with his playmates and at one point his ball fell into the ditch. Since it was not demarcated and looked like a rubbish heap, Jisan jumped on the garbage to fetch the ball. Within moments, he sank and was unable to resurface. Eventually, after the five-hour operation from the firefighters, he was taken to Sikder Medical College Hospital at Rayer Bazar, where the duty doctors declared him dead.

Hashu Mia's son will never return to him, but was it an unavoidable death? The death of three-year-old Hridoy, who fell into the Jirani canal of Mugda area in October last year, whose body was not recovered until six days later; the death of four-year-old Ismail Hossain Neerob, who met his end in an open sewerage line in Kadamtali in December 2015; the demise of three-year-old Jihad who fell into a 600-foot deep shaft at Bangladesh Railway Colony in Shahjahanpur in December 2014—none of these losses of fledgling lives can be termed unavoidable by any stretch of the imagination. Death due to negligence and irresponsibility of government bodies is a form of manslaughter and sadly, the rate of such happenings is on the rise in Dhaka. But why do we remain silent and inactive?

According to urban planner Iqbal Habib, who is an architect and member secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), the two city corporations were given the responsibility to recover and conserve the canals so that the canals could retain the normal flow of water.

"This decision was made in a coordination meeting led by late mayor Annisul Huq last July, upon discussion with the local government division, city corporations, water development board, public works department, WASA and some other bodies of the government. But they couldn't bring any change so far. In fact, it is the city corporation, which failed even to manage the solid wastes of the city and eventually chose the canals and ditches to dump wastes. Although the waste collectors of city corporations are supposed to collect wastes from different areas in trucks and dump them in certain outfalls or secondary transfer station (STS), some of them are only willing to dump the waste in the canals," he says.

However, when contacted, the DNCC chief waste management officer (CWMO) Commodore Abdur



PHOTO: COURTESY

sure who is supposed to clean the canal, but managing solid wastes is the responsibility of the city corporation. Also, WASA doesn't work on cleaning the canals; rather it works on the navigability to drain out rain water," adds Khan.

"The child's death is in no way WASA's responsibility," he concludes.

With the authorities refusing to acknowledge responsibility, what recourse, if any, do the parents have for justice or compensation?

Barrister Md Abdul Halim, chairman, Children Charity Bangladesh Foundation informs us that the Bangladeshi Constitution gives the right to the family of a victim to file for death due to the negligence of government authorities; additionally, they can also directly file a constitutional tort case in High Court seeking compensation under Article 102 of the Constitution.

Barrister Halim was the lead counsel in Jihad's compensation case—one of the most discussed compensation cases, the full verdict of which was released last October asking the government authorities concerned to pay BDT 20 lakh as compensation to his parents. As per the direction, Bangladesh Railway and Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence are supposed

occasions, he has been caught up in the blame game played by the authorities. "For example, when I filed a writ petition against the Dhaka WASA, two city corporations and a private company association of Kadamtali for the death of Ismail Hossain Neerob, WASA sent a report saying that they were not the owners of the land on which the sewerage line was constructed. Instead, they said that it was the Bangladesh Garment Owners Association who took the land upon lease from the railways department," he relates.

"Four months back, I sought a supplementary rule to the court mentioning that the chairman of the railways department and secretary of Ministry of Railways should be made a party to the case. The court issued such a rule. But the rule has not matured yet—it takes a long time and you know that it is very difficult to fix a court date for any matter, because all the courts are overburdened," he adds.

A part of the blame must also fall on the citizens who misuse the natural water bodies and dump garbage in them. At the same time, letting the government authorities use the water bodies to dump waste or sitting idly by as they avoid reforming the death traps cannot be acceptable citizen behaviour. It is high time people knew their rights and responsibilities, and acted to demand change. ■