

THE ON-ARRIVAL MESS

Stricter visa sanctions ahead of elections trouble travellers

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30-year-old Sharmin Akhter* holds dual citizenship. Born to a German father and a Bangladeshi mother, she possesses both countries' passports. She was nevertheless nearly deported from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport earlier this month.

Why? The immigration officials gave her different answers but Sharmin is quite certain that it was because of her profession. She works as a journalist for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in London. "I had to wait at the immigration office for five hours before they let me through. During the ordeal, when they did an entire background check on me, the two officials I talked to said that they were under extra pressure due to the national elections," Sharmin tells *Star Weekend*.

Sharmin's story isn't a one-off incident. Ahead of the national elections, the Bangladeshi authorities have been criticised for its 'inability to issue visas' on time. The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) recently decided against sending a team to Bangladesh to observe the elections because they didn't receive visas within the required timeframe.

ANFREL, a regional network of civil society organisations funded by the US through the National Democratic Institute, was supposed to send 32 observers to Bangladesh. As a result, deputy spokesperson of the US State Department, Robert Palladino, expressed his disappointment at the "Bangladesh government's inability to grant credentials and issue visas within the timeframe necessary to conduct a credible international monitoring mission to the majority of international election monitors from the ANFREL," in a statement last week.

What makes Sharmin's case stand apart, though, is the fact that immigration officials tried to deport a Bangladeshi citizen. "I think it goes to show how scared they are of foreign journalists," says Sharmin.

Sharmin, who worked in Bangladesh for an NGO for four years and visits her grandmother and parents on a yearly basis,

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landed in Dhaka in the first week of December to spend the Christmas holidays with her family. She wasn't here for reporting and, in fact, was scheduled to return to London before the elections.

What was a little different about her visit this time though was that her new German passport didn't have the 'No Visa Required' stamp on it, something she needed in order to enter Bangladesh on a foreign passport. Her Bangladeshi passport had expired a couple of years ago.

Under such circumstances, Sharmin could have entered the country on an on-arrival Visa as a person of Bangladeshi origin. "I knew things would be a little different this time, so I came prepared. I brought my two old German passports, which had the 'No Visa Required' stamp. I also brought my three old Bangladeshi passports, which prove that I am a citizen," says Sharmin.

Once she reached the On-Arrival Visa counter, she began filling up the application form. "In the section where they asked me for my profession, I wrote that I was a media professional. I also told them that I wasn't here for covering the elections. I didn't want to lie," says Sharmin.

Unfortunately, according to the BBC journalist, it was that bit that caused her ordeal. "The immigration officer went to his supervisor in the next desk. And then they went upstairs to speak to some other officers," recalls Sharmin.

"I was also taken upstairs to the immigration room. Two hours later, an officer told me that I was going to be sent back and that the next flight was that night. At that point, I was shocked. How could they deport me? I am a Bangladeshi," she says.

By then, Sharmin had already begun speaking to her mother who was waiting for her outside. She spoke to the officer in Bangla and told her that her family was waiting for her outside the airport. That seemed to take the officer by surprise.

"I think what happened was they didn't realise I was a Bangladeshi citizen and not just a person with Bangladeshi origin. After they realised that, they started a new line of research.

"They talked to my mother, who is a human rights activist. They even called up my 83-year-old grandmother to check if what I was saying was true. My grandmother didn't even know why she was being asked all this," says Sharmin.

In the end, Sharmin had to sign a document which stated that she wouldn't be reporting or writing during her stay in Bangladesh. "I agreed to sign that because there seemed to be no other option. But it was very unsettling. They were basically telling me, a citizen of Bangladesh, that I would not be able to report on anything. As a Bangladeshi, that's my right. I shouldn't have to sign anything," says Sharmin.

Sharmin was eventually given a 15-day visa and she thought her troubles would end there. However, when she reached home, she realised that her visa would expire on December 25 and that would make it 14 days and not 15. "I don't know why this happened. Maybe it was a mistake. But I am scheduled to fly on December 26. So, I had to spend three whole days at the passport office to rectify this," says Sharmin.

The 30-year-old BBC journalist wasn't the only one who had to go through this. During her stay at the airport, Sharmin met an American who worked for an NGO that dealt with displaced victims who was facing similar troubles.

The employee had come to Bangladesh for a workshop but wasn't allowed to enter on 'security grounds'. He had once previously entered Bangladesh.

Star Weekend contacted the American NGO employee via e-mail. He confirmed the incident and described the incident as 'unusual'. He also lamented that his company had spent a lot of money behind the workshop.

Quite a few such similar stories have come to the fore on social media in the last few weeks. Another American in his early 20s, who had come to visit friends in Bangladesh from India to spend Christmas, was denied entry after he applied for an on-arrival visa.

A foreign resident in Dhaka witnessed a few of her friends facing difficulties upon arrival. "I think the biggest hassle was that there was no previous information so people couldn't change plans. And it seemed that they gave 27th or 28th as the leaving date, but there is no possible way that everyone could actually leave on their flights those days. Would all these flights have seats?"

"There was no information as to whether visas could be extended. From the experience of my friend, who used to live here and understands Bangla very well, she could hear the main officer in charge complaining to her co-worker that she felt so much pressure to follow through with the order she was given from her superiors, but was not given any help in dealing with all the foreigners who were upset and showing it," she adds.

Speaking to *Star Weekend*, immigration authorities did admit that things have been difficult for on-arrival passengers.

"For journalists, we have a list. Journalists will be allowed to enter based on the list. So, it's better for people who are working as journalists to obtain a visa from beforehand.

"Otherwise they will have to wait for a long time. We have to take permission from various departments before we can give that person the permission to enter. For NGO officials, the situation is worse. They need to take the visa from beforehand for sure. This phase will continue for some time," explains an officer from the immigration department of the Bangladesh Police.

Tightening security during elections isn't something unexpected or new. However, it becomes a problem when there isn't a proper system in place. And people like Sharmin become victims. "What I faced at the airport was nothing short of harassment... and it wasn't just me. There were several others who had to wait for long hours just to get in," she says.

*The journalist decided against using her real name out of fear of repercussions.