

A journey by plane that I will never forget

FROM PAGE 1

Lily and I had planned to visit her sisters in Dubai immediately after my retirement. Once I lived and worked in Dubai for a long time. It would allow us to reconnect with loved ones and give me some time to think about what I wanted to do next.

So, on the afternoon of February 24, we boarded BG147 from Dhaka to Dubai via Chittagong. We hadn't flown with the national carrier on international flights in over a decade, but, hearing stories of how much it had improved in the past few years, we decided we'd give their Business Class a try. Lily and I were sat in the window and aisle seats, respectively, in Row 2, just one row away from the front bulkhead on the left side of the plane. And elderly lady and another gentleman (most probably an Indian) sat in front of us on the right side. Soon after the plane left Dhaka, the gentleman moved to the left side with the permission of the cabin crew, leaving a aisle seat empty in front of me.

The journey was unremarkable for the first 15/20 minutes or so of the 50 minute flight. Then, suddenly a young man entered into business class a young man from Economy Class entered into business class and sat in the now empty seat in front of me, a backpack on his lap. The cabin crew were taken aback, but, before anyone could protest, he unzipped his backpack, reached in, and retrieved a handgun, a lighter and what looked like an explosive device. He stood up, made his way to the front galley in front of the closed cockpit door and proclaimed, in English, "This plane has been hijacked! Open the cockpit door immediately...I will blow out the plane if it's landed."

Terror overcame the front cabin at these words. The curtains were still drawn (opened later on) so it's possible that no one at the back was yet aware what was going on, but we could see the hijacker was armed. To prove this point, he fired his handgun once at the door of the unoccupied lavatory in the front. The smell of gunpowder filled the pressurized cabin air.

"I am a Scottish citizen. I have only one demand: I want my wife back. She is a celebrity." shouted the man. His manner wasn't normal: it seemed he was either severely unbalanced or on some sort of drugs.

As the one occupying the aisle seat nearest the front of the plane, I was closest to the would-be terrorist. I asked him whether his wife was in board. "No, she's not in the plane," he replied.

He soon became increasingly agitated. He started kicking at the cockpit door, demanding to be let in. There was no verbal response from the cockpit, but the pilot might have heard the message loud and clear. Plane started descending sharp. The plane went into a near free fall as we began climbing down from 30,000 feet towards the ground at an alarming speed. On our

way down the plane rolled violently from side to side. I would later find out from the pilot that he had only one objective: to get the plane on the ground at Chittagong before the cockpit was breached. He knew he had the lives of nearly 150 souls in his hands, and he did all he could to keep the controls out of the hand of the madman. The rolls were to try to knock the man off balance.

In his agitation, the terrorist blank fired his gun again. At this, the crew who had been trying to placate him realized that he was dangerously unpredictable and ran back towards the economy cabin. An uproar ensued, as those passengers in the back began to realize the full gravity of the situation.

I spoke up again, shouting at him to be reasonable. "What good will it do to kill all of us? Let us land and all 150 of us will request to the authorities so that we can get you what you want." He was unrelenting, saying that if the plane is landed he would be arrested. And he would not allow that to happen. He will blow the plane with a bomb.

He kept waving a lit lighter near the fuse of the explosive in his hand, threatening to blow us all up. "I know I will be arrested when this plane lands."

At first I had feared that he may have accomplices stationed in other areas of the plane. But hearing him speak and watching him move, it became clear to me that he was most likely alone and he didn't have the skills or temperament to take control of the situation. But the explosive and handgun were dangerously unpredictable.

As we continued our rapid descent, I could see the Bay of Bengal fast approaching in the window. The approach at Chittagong begins over the sea, but I wasn't sure if we had enough height and speed to make it to land or whether the pilot was attempting a water landing. Eventually the plane's wheels hit the edge of the runway and the pilot slammed on the brakes. The speed at which we hit the tarmac had me concerned about damage to the plane or skidding of the runway, but the pilot was very quickly able to bring us to a slow crawl.

My own situation was dire. I was the first person in the young man's line of sight. If he was going to shoot anyone, it would likely start with the cabin crew or me and my wife. If he was going to trigger his explosive, I would take the most impact. I had to get out of there, and move to relative safety at the back of the plane.

An opening presented itself when the man was engaged by the cabin crew in a heated discussion. I grabbed my wife Lily by the arm and we crawled on our arms and knees out of our seats into the aisle and towards the back of the plane. Others in the business cabin followed.

When we got to the back, one of the emergency exits had already been opened and there was a crowd of people blocking it. The exit opposite it had not yet been opened so I tried that

instead. I've never opened a plane's exit door and I'm not sure how I managed, but I got it open and stepped out onto the wing.

I hadn't quite realized how much of a drop it was from the wing to the tarmac. Must have been 12 feet or so. I had no choice. I jumped. It felt like I kept falling and it wasn't exactly a smooth landing. Later I realized I had badly scraped my ankle and slightly twisted my knee. But at the time all I could think about was helping Lily down. I looked up and saw her sitting by the edge of the wing, crying. I reached up but couldn't reach her legs hanging over the wing. I urged her to jump so I could catch her. Before she had a chance to respond, someone from behind her pushed her off, and she landed roughly, only partially caught by me. I was still afraid of the purported explosive in the terrorist's hand and wanted to get as far away from the plane as possible. We were in no state to run but we walked as quickly as we could toward the terminal in the distance. As we walked past the still running jet engine, a blast of hot air knocked Lily and me off our feet again. Thank God we didn't walk in front of the engine, I don't know if we could have resisted being sucked in. By this time her throat was parched and she couldn't speak. She looked like she was about to faint/die. Someone from the airport came running to us and, grabbing someone else's half-drunk water bottle offered it to her.

As we made it back into the airport, an overwhelming sense of relief came over me. At that point in time I realised that we left behind in the plane our passport, Boarding pass, mobile and all other valuables. By the Grace of the Almighty, we had somehow survived. At many points in the last 30 minutes, I had told myself: this is it, this is how my life ends. What an irony, people would say, the first day of his retirement would be the last of his life. But the All-Merciful has other plans for Lily and me. I'm not sure what they are yet, but I know nothing I do will be quite the same after this experience.

P.S. I would love to say that when we got into the airport that was the end of the ordeal and we were well taken care of. Unfortunately the truth is that we and all 150 other passengers would continue to suffer for the next 12 hours. Airport or Biman were not ready to handle such a situation. But that's a story for another time...

(About this write-up the writer clearly mentioned that he was receiving so many phone calls and messages from his family members and friends about the incident. That's why he shared his experience with them. Regarding the pistol he said that he was not sure if the pistol or the bomb were real or toy. But at that particular moment we all thought that it was real and we all became extremely frightened. In reality what it was the investigators would know better.)

Syria displays huge cache of 'rebel explosives' in south

AFP, Near Daraa

Syria's army yesterday displayed a huge cache of what it said were powerful explosives left behind by rebels in Daraa province, the birthplace of the uprising that sparked the country's civil war.

During a government-organised trip for journalists to the area, an AFP correspondent saw thousands of sealed containers wrapped in dirt-covered sheaths.

A source who asked not to be named said they contained C-4, a highly explosive chemical.

He estimated that around eight tonnes of explosives had been recovered.

"The destructive force of one kilogram of this material is equivalent to 13 kilograms of TNT," he told the correspondent during the visit, as Syrian soldiers watched on.

He said rebels used to "stuff C-4 into rockets" and then launch them towards government-held areas.

"Each rocket used to destroy an entire building because of the potency of this chemical, which was also used to rig cars, vehicles and armoured vehicles that targeted positions and checkpoints of the Syrian Arab Army," he said.

The source said the explosives had entered Syria through "neighbouring countries", without specifying which ones.

"These explosives are very, very expensive. Usually, they are delivered exclusively to armies," he said.

'Gunfight' kills 1

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Hospital, doctors declared him dead, the SI added.

Police also claimed to have recovered a pistol, 100 yaba pills and hemp from the spot.

Elsewhere, an alleged robber sustained bullet injuries in both of his legs during a "gunfight" with police in Chandmari area of Pabna's Ishwardi upazila early yesterday.

Police arrested the alleged robber -- Md Abdullah, 35 -- during the "gunfight" and sent him to Pabna Medical College Hospital.

Bahauddin Faruki, officer-in-charge of Ishwardi Police Station, claimed that five policemen, including an assistant superintendent of Pabna police, were injured during the "gunfight".

Police recovered a gun and two bullets from the spot, the OC claimed, adding that Abdullah was accused in 11 cases related to robbery, murder and other criminal activities.

The Daily Star, however, could not independently verify any of the claims.

Our Pabna correspondent contributed to this report.

2 men sent to jail

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started screaming, forcing the criminals to flee the scene.

Apurbo Hasan, officer-in-charge of Jessore Kotwali Model Police Station, said the girl was sent to Jessore General Hospital for medical tests. Further actions would be taken after law enforcers receive her medical reports.

'Crystal meth'

FROM PAGE 2

drive in Jhigatola and discovered the laboratory. During the daylong drive, the DNC team recovered new drug-making machinery, hard disks and chemicals from the factory, said Khorshid.

During an investigation, the DNC team learned that the owner of the six-storey building, Hasib Moammar Rashid, 32, lives in Dhanmondi with his family and went into hiding soon after the drive.

The DNC later detained the building's caretaker Jahangir Alam, 39, for interrogation.

"During primary investigation, we learned that Hasib got involved in narcotics trade when he went to Malaysia for studies. After returning home, he set up the factory," said Khorshid, adding, Hasib was trying to market the drug as it is new in Bangladesh.

The AD further said they had seized eight foreign and local debit and credit cards and sent a notification to law enforcers so that he cannot leave the country.

"We are also trying to arrest other associates of Hasib," he added.

A case would be filed against Hasib and the caretaker and his other associates would be included after verifying their involvement, Khorshid said.

He could not say the actual price of the crystal meth immediately since it is new in the country. Crystal meth looks like small crystal cubes and MDMA is a tablet.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the average street price of per gram of methamphetamine in China is \$80, whereas in Australia it is \$500, reports BBC.

City to have digital

FROM PAGE 1

JP MP Rustom Ali Farazi, the PM said her government had taken initiatives to provide financial assistance to "surrendered drug dealers" so that they can start other businesses.

In his question, Chunnu said people were disappointed with the government mainly because of the capital's unbearable traffic congestion.

In another supplementary question, JP MP Kazi Feroz Rashid asked whether the PM would instruct the traffic division of police to digitally control vehicles at different intersections.

"We want to control traffic in Dhaka city electronically and digitally. Some parts of the capital have already been brought under such a system and if the system is introduced to other parts of the city, people's sufferings will be reduced to a great extent," Hasina replied.

The government has reintroduced an automatic traffic lights which almost went out of order, she said.

"I would like to tell the authorities, which control traffic signals, not to hold vehicles for a long time."

The PM said she has almost stopped leaving home because vehicles get held when her motorcade moves.

"Except attending office and other programmes, I seldom visit other places..."

"When I assumed office in 2009, there were 52 vehicles in my motorcade. I reduced it to eight later."

Referring to traffic congestions in London and Washington, Hasina said traffic jam was a problem in all developed countries.

REHABILITATION OF DRUG DEALERS

Hasina said the government would

Three killed

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they arrested the driver, Dudu Mia, 55, of Charkagoria of Satkania, Chattogram, and seized the lorry.

A case was filed with Chandina police in this regard.

Relocation begins

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Briefing reporters after the meeting yesterday, Industries Secretary Abdul Halim said, "We have found six acres of land in Gazipur's Tongi and 6.17 acres in the capital's Postogola area."

The site in Tongi is empty land of state-run Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation and the location in Postogola, previously owned by state-run Ujala Match Factory, is now unused, the secretary said.

"We will soon start construction of temporary steel sheds at the two places. We will even work on public holidays so that we can complete the work soon to begin the relocation."

The businessmen would have to pay a minimum monthly rent, to be fixed soon, for using the facility, Halim said.

He also informed journalists that the government started acquiring 50 acres and selected another 200 acres in Keraniganj for setting up two chemical and acid industrial zones.

The businessmen would have to take their chemicals and acid from the

rehabilitate the drug dealers after they surrender.

"Many drug peddlers are surrendering due to a (nationwide) massive awareness campaign... Financial assistance will be given to them for their rehabilitation so that they can engage in different businesses to lead a better life."

About the plans to fight drugs, she said, "Necessary measures have already been taken to set up anti-drugs special zone in Teknaf."

The Philippines

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which only accused Myanmar of human rights violations but did little to help.

Former presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said last year that the Philippines had facilities that could accommodate refugees, citing the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in Bataan.

Roque added that the Philippine government had an "open-door policy" for refugees.

Over 750,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar's Rakhine state following a brutal military crackdown since August 2017. They joined some 300,000 Rohingya who had fled to Bangladesh following previous waves of violence in Rakhine, where they are denied citizenship.

The UN and several Western countries have accused Myanmar of ethnic cleansing, an allegation which Myanmar denies. Human rights organisations termed the crackdown a genocide and crimes against humanity.

In 1975, the Philippine government accommodated thousands of Vietnamese refugees who fled their country after the Vietnam War ended.

Earlier, the Philippines under then-President Manuel Quezon gave refuge to Jews escaping the Holocaust in the late 1930s.

Call gets

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Raising question over hospitals' preparation in tackling the situation after a massive disaster, Director of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital Prof Uttam Kumar Barua said, "I don't think we are prepared for such incidents. Not all hospitals have the ability to handle such emergency situations."

He added that Sheikh Hasina National Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute at Dhaka Medical College Hospital was an exception.

On February 14, a fire broke out at Suhrawardy hospital and around 1,200 patients, including those at the intensive care unit and the surgery ward, had to be evacuated.

The fire caused immense suffering to the patients and their relatives at one of the country's major hospitals.

Six days later, another fire broke out in Old Dhaka's Chawkbazar, killing at least 69 people and injuring over 50 others.

At yesterday's roundtable, Prof Uttam said Suhrawardy hospital was built keeping enough space. That is why it was easier for them to evacuate patients.

Saying that locals helped them during the evacuation that night, he suggested that the government organise a community-based training on safe evacuation during disasters in every locality.

Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services, said public awareness was needed to tackle emergency situations.

"Structural design of hospitals needs to be improved," she added.

Moyazem Hossain, additional secretary of the disaster management and relief ministry, said they would hold inter-ministerial talks to address the issue.

Saudia Anwar, a capacity development specialist at the UNDP, said many survivors, especially women and children, suffered from trauma after disaster. "They need to be provided with post-disaster trauma therapy."

Prof Manzurul Haque Khan, of the National Institute of Preventive and Social Medicine, Rezaul Karim, consultant of Plan International, Bangladesh, among others, spoke on the occasion.

Prothom Alo Associate Editor Abdul Quayyum moderated the discussion.

Trump, Kim kick off

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Trump and Kim held a 20-minute, one-on-one chat before sitting down to dinner with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Trump's acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, Kim's top envoy, Kim Yong Chol, and North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho.

The two leaders will hold a series of meetings today, the White House said. The venue has not been announced.

"We're going to have a very busy day tomorrow ... Probably a very quick dinner," said a smiling, relaxed looking Trump, seated beside Kim at a round table with the other four officials and two interpreters.

"Our relationship is a very special relationship."

Kim also appeared at ease. "We'll have a very interesting dialogue," he told Trump.

GOOD RELATIONS

Trump said late last year he and Kim "fell in love" but whether the bonhomie can move them beyond summit pagantry to substantive progress on eliminating Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal that threatens the United States is the question that will dominate the talks.

Trump and Kim's Singapore summit, the first meeting between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, ended with great fanfare but little substance over how to dismantle North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

In the run-up to this summit, Trump has indicated a more flexible stance, saying he was in no rush to secure North Korea's denuclearisation. He repeated that yesterday, saying while some people believed the talks should be moving more quickly, he was satisfied.

Trump has held out the prospect of easing sanctions if North Korea does something "meaningful".

Some critics have said Trump appeared to be wavering on a long-standing US demand for complete and irreversible denuclearisation by North Korea, and risked squandering leverage if he gave away too much, too quickly.

Asked if he would declare a formal end to the Korean War, which North Korea has long called for, Trump said: "We'll see."

North and South Korea have been technically at war since their 1950-53 conflict, with the Americans backing the South, ended in a truce, not a treaty. 'AWESOME' POTENTIAL

US intelligence officials have said there is no sign North Korea will ever give up its entire arsenal of nuclear weapons, which

it sees as its guarantee of national security. Analysts say it won't commit to significant disarmament unless punishing US-led economic sanctions are eased.

The two sides have discussed specific and verifiable denuclearisation measures, such as allowing inspectors to observe the dismantlement of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear reactor, US and South Korean officials say.

US concessions could include opening liaison offices or clearing the way for inter-Korean projects.

Despite little progress on his goal of ridding North Korea of its weapons programmes, Trump appeared to be betting on his personal relationship with North Korea's young leader, and the economic incentive after 70 years of hostility between their countries.

"Vietnam is thriving like few places on earth. North Korea would be the same, and very quickly, if it would denuclearise," Trump said on Twitter ahead of the meeting.

"The potential is AWESOME, a great opportunity, like almost none other in history, for my friend Kim Jong Un. We will know fairly soon - Very Interesting!"

Any deal will face scrutiny from American lawmakers and other sceptics who doubt North Korea is willing to give up the weapons.

Green pacers

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Courtney Walsh said the left-armed was not ready for all three games -- is ready for the challenge. With 12 Tests to his name, Mustafizur is the most experienced among the lot which also features Abu Jayed, Ebadot Hossain and Khaled Ahmed. Among the others, Jayed has played three Tests and Khaled featured in one while Ebadot is yet to be capped in the format.

Given the type of pitch, Bangladesh will presumably be taking the field with three pacers. If he is not rested, Mustafizur will be an obvious pick, with competition for two spots among the other three pacers.

However, even Mustafizur has been out of touch lately, so it can be said that a very tough challenge lies ahead for the quicks even on a green-top, regardless of which combination Bangladesh opt to go with in the first Test.