

Stories from a delayed flight: Migrant anxieties amid the Middle East crisis



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The flight from the Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram to Dhaka was scheduled to depart at 8:30 pm on March 12. Normally, the journey takes about 50 minutes, but when I went to collect my boarding pass, I was told the flight would be delayed by at least three hours. The reason was that the incoming flight from Dubai had departed late. Although my flight was domestic, the US-Bangla Airlines aircraft had arrived from Dubai via Chattogram before continuing on to Dhaka. There was little to do except wait.

Once I boarded the flight, I met many passengers who had come from Dubai, and I spoke with several of them. Some were irritated by the delay; many were simply relieved to have returned home. Some shared stories of anxiety about the changing situation in the Gulf countries amid the ongoing US-Israel war against Iran.

One of the travellers I met was Mohammad Yasin from Cumilla. He looked exhausted as he stood in line at the baggage collection carousel. During our brief conversation, he told me he had returned home after six years. When asked about the situation in Dubai, he described it as both "good and bad."

"One good thing," he said, "is that Dubai has managed to prevent most missiles from reaching the ground." When I asked how Bangladeshi migrants were coping, he said, "There is definitely concern; we have never

seen people in the UAE so frightened before."

Another migrant, Moinul Hossain, said that people from Europe and America appeared even more anxious about the war. "They are leaving Dubai," he said, adding that Bangladeshis are also worried and a lot of stories and rumours are circulating among them.

When I asked my fellow travellers if they would be willing to share short video statements about their experiences in the war, everyone politely declined. "Please don't record videos," they said. "In Arab countries we are not allowed to talk about the war, especially on social media."

They explained that migrant workers across the Middle East had been advised not to post anything about the war online, including photos or videos. Some even claimed that several Bangladeshis had already been detained for violating such restrictions.

Another passenger on the same flight was travelling with his wife and newborn. He introduced himself as Sultanul Islam. According to him, one reassuring aspect was that authorities would inform residents in advance whenever there was a potential risk so they could remain vigilant.

After a brief pause, I asked if anyone knew about the situation in Saudi Arabia. Several passengers said there was no major panic in Jeddah. However, they mentioned some

incidents in Riyadh and Dammam. They also spoke about the deaths of two Bangladeshi nationals in Saudi Arabia.

Yet beyond the fear of war, what worried them most was the uncertainty about their livelihoods. There are good reasons for such anxiety. Around five million Bangladeshis live across the Middle

and Jordan—temporarily closed their airspace from February 28. According to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, a total of 447 flights from Dhaka were cancelled between February 28 and March 13 because of these restrictions.

As a result, many people who had spent nearly five lakh taka or more to migrate for work could not leave the

Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon. With the escalation of tensions centred on Iran and Israel, concerns about these labour markets are increasing. If the conflict continues and flight operations remain disrupted, Bangladesh's overseas labour market could shrink, potentially affecting remittance flows.

The conflict has already disrupted the deployment of new workers. Those preparing to migrate may face delays and uncertainty. Workers who came home on leave may also struggle to return to their jobs abroad. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment has already opened a hotline to assist migrants whose visas expired due to flight cancellations.

Much of the Middle Eastern economy depends on energy, construction, and infrastructure projects. If the conflict persists, such projects could slow down or be suspended. Since many Bangladeshi migrants work in construction, recruitment may decline, and some workers might even return home. So, the government should begin preparing now—coordinating with public, private, and international organisations—to respond to potential challenges.

There is no doubt that remittances are vital for Bangladesh's economy. In 2025, migrant workers sent home over \$30 billion, most of which came from the Middle East. If employment or income among migrants declines because of the conflict, the impact will be felt not only by individual families but also by rural economies and national reserves. However, past experience suggests that during crises migrants often send more money to support their families. Therefore, remittance flows may not immediately decline, especially during the Eid season.

Despite the risks, crises sometimes

create new opportunities. Once the conflict ends, reconstruction and infrastructure projects may generate fresh demand for workers. At the same time, Bangladesh must diversify its labour markets beyond the Middle East. Expanding opportunities in Europe and Japan holds significant promise. But entering these markets requires higher levels of language skills and technical training.

At this moment, however, the most urgent priority is safety. Missile attacks linked to the conflict have already killed four Bangladeshis—two in Saudi Arabia and one each in Bahrain and the UAE—while several others have been injured. Bangladesh embassies across the Middle East have urged migrants to remain indoors unless absolutely necessary until the situation stabilises. They have also advised people to refrain from uploading any photos or videos related to the war on social media.

When I left the airport and drove through the illuminated streets of Dhaka, I kept thinking of how, behind this brightly lit city and Bangladesh's development, lies the immense contribution of migrant workers. We often talk about remittances and foreign reserves. But how often do we truly think about the lives, worries, hopes, frustrations, and human stories of millions of migrants working quietly behind the scenes? They give so much to the state, but how much does the state give back to them—especially during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the ongoing war?

As I reflected on these questions, I silently wished that this violent conflict would end soon. That dawn would come again. Until then, may the millions of migrants living far from home remain safe—those who carry Bangladesh carefully in their hearts, even from thousands of miles away.



FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

'Typically, large numbers of Bangladeshis leave the country for the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon. With the escalation of tensions centred on Iran and Israel, concerns about these labour markets are increasing.'

East and send remittances back home. Any crisis in the region, therefore, becomes a crisis for them as well.

Those already working in the region are naturally worried, but perhaps even more anxious are those who have not yet been able to travel. Due to security risks amid the ongoing conflict, several Middle Eastern countries—including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar,

and Jordan—temporarily closed their airspace from February 28. According to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, a total of 447 flights from Dhaka were cancelled between February 28 and March 13 because of these restrictions.

Official projections indicate that between 1976 and 2022, some 1.48 crore Bangladeshis migrated abroad as migrant workers, among whom around 10 lakh were female workers. Typically, large numbers of Bangladeshis leave the country for the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar,

Bangladesh desperately needs a Habermas



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Germany had a Jürgen Habermas, who died on March 14, 2026. He was not just a philosopher writing for academics; he was a public intellectual, someone who used ideas to help society understand itself, confront its own mistakes, and imagine a better future. He believed a country cannot move forward unless its people openly discuss the past, debate their values, and reason together. Habermas helped Germany face the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust. He argued that societies must address historical atrocities not only with laws or politics but also through open, honest conversations among citizens. He emphasised the importance of a public sphere—an independent space where people could debate freely and influence decisions. Democracy, he believed, thrives when citizens can deliberate collectively about what is just, ethical, and fair.

Habermas also developed the idea of communicative rationality, which means that understanding comes not from authority or propaganda, but from dialogue aimed at mutual comprehension. Through discussion, societies can confront moral failures, challenge dominant narratives, and make reasoned collective judgements. Habermas did not confine himself to abstract philosophy. His writing, including *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, examined how public debate could shape politics and hold authority accountable. Beyond books, he wrote essays, gave interviews, and participated in public debates, engaging directly in discussions about Germany's past, the Cold War, European integration, and global conflicts. By connecting theory to public life, he encouraged newspapers, educators, and civic institutions to foster spaces for discussion, gradually creating a culture where confronting history became a shared responsibility rather than a partisan or taboo topic.

Bangladesh, by contrast, has never had a figure like Habermas. From its beginning, the country needed someone who could combine intellectual insight with public engagement to help the

nation make peace with its past. But no such figure emerged.

In 1971, Bangladesh gained independence after a brutal war that killed millions. Some groups, including Jamaat-e-Islami, collaborated with the Pakistani army in committing atrocities. Yet after independence, the nation

suspended over citizens' reasoned judgement.

The need for a Habermas in Bangladesh is as urgent today as it was 55 years ago. Recent crises, especially the government-led brutalities during the 2024 July uprising and the 15 years of Awami League rule preceding it, have left behind deep political and social fractures. Efforts to reshape narratives or rehabilitate despised outfits through some "refined" actors are neither enough nor effective. What is needed are spaces where citizens can reason together, debate openly, and reflect on mistakes, accountability, and ethics. Symbolic gestures, slogans, or partisan narratives cannot replace

discussion Habermas envisioned. Even in the post-2024 context, debates remain polarised, performative, or politically controlled. Possibilities of victims-led truth commissions—bodies that investigate past injustices, document experiences, and promote accountability while fostering dialogue and healing—fell through. There is also no genuine public sphere where citizens can collectively reflect on history or evaluate contemporary politics critically. Without it, unresolved history and political tensions persist, leaving society like a ship adrift in turbulent waters, vulnerable to repeating past mistakes.

For Habermas, reflecting on history was more than just about assigning blame. It was about understanding

systemic causes, recognising ethical failures, and learning lessons to prevent repetition. In Bangladesh, citizens feel injustice deeply, yet few forums allow them to examine why events happened, which structural problems persist, or what lessons can be learned. Indeed, why did certain political forces dominate for decades? Why were the atrocities of 1971 left unaddressed? How can citizens reason together about accountability today? These are precisely the conversations Habermas would urge, grounded in reason, ethics, and inclusivity.

Today, Bangladesh desperately needs a Habermas—not to dictate what people should think, but to cultivate a culture of engaging in public reasoning, discussion, and

reflection. This should not mean the emergence of a single individual of Habermas' stature. What Bangladesh needs, in a very practical sense, is a collective force: a network of civic institutions, independent media forums, grassroots dialogue initiatives, and civic education programmes that nurture deliberation. Independent media can host reasoned debates free from political control, civic education can teach young citizens critical reflection and ethical responsibility, and community dialogue initiatives can give victims and marginalised voices a meaningful role in engaging with history and governance. In short, if Bangladesh truly wants to strengthen its democracy, it had better learn to listen to itself.



German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who passed away on March 14.

did not engage in sustained public discussion to process these events. Unlike Germany, where intellectuals guided citizens in reflecting on Nazi crimes, Bangladesh largely avoided confronting the moral and structural questions of its own history. Today, some of the same political actors involved in the 1971 genocide receive a posthumous condolence motion in parliament, leaving ordinary citizens frustrated that the wounds of history have been sidelined.

Habermas would argue that this lack of public deliberation is the core problem. Without spaces for citizens to reason together, discuss past wrongs, or critically examine governance, society cannot form a shared understanding of its values or history. Memory becomes partisan, debates polarised, and historical wounds lie festering beneath the surface. Democracy remains like a half-built bridge spanning only part of the river, with legitimacy

this kind of public discussion.

South Africa engaged in debates about apartheid even as Archbishop Desmond Tutu led the formal Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Argentina, intellectuals guided discussions about the "Dirty War" and its moral consequences. Rwanda, after the 1994 genocide, demonstrates the power of collective deliberation as community-based Gacaca courts let ordinary citizens testify, discuss, and reckon with atrocities under the guidance of local leaders, journalists, and civic intellectuals. In each case, progress depended not only on formal tribunals but on reasoned public discussion that helped societies confront structural failures and restore moral balance.

Bangladesh, while home to a sea of intellectuals, policy analysts, commentators, subject-matter experts, and so-called senior journalists, has rarely fostered spaces for the kind of inclusive public



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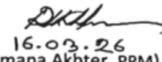
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| 1247493 | Polao Rice | 16-March-2026 15:00 PM | 01-April-2026 12:30 PM | OTM |
| 1247506 | Fire Wood | 16-March-2026 15:00 PM | 01-April-2026 12:30 PM | OTM |
| 1247661 | Wheat Crushing | 16-March-2026 15:00 PM | 01-April-2026 12:30 PM | OTM |
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