

Saudi-bound workers suffer, airlines' hands tied due to manpower shortage

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Date: 01 June, 2021



Dhaka : Thousands of Saudi Arabia bound Bangladeshi migrant workers are in great despair as airlines are now stating that hotel bookings for the seven-day-on-arrival institutional quarantine in KSA must be carried out by passengers themselves. Saudi Arabian Airlines on May 26 said they can no longer help migrant workers with hotel bookings at its office.

Instead, the airline hung a notice at different points of their office premises, informing that Saudi-bound migrant workers will have to complete the hotel booking process on their own a minimum of 72 hours before their flight's departure through the Saudia Holidays website <https://holidaysbysaudia.com>.

For hotel booking confirmation, Saudi-bound passengers were also asked to contact their respective employer/Kaphil/company/travel agency, or visit the website.

"Without booking through Saudia Holidays website, no hotel confirmation will be accepted," the notice read.

Following this new announcement, troubles for Saudi-bound Bangladeshi migrant workers related to hotel booking for institutional quarantine reached its greatest

heights.

As a result, about 1,000 Saudi-bound Bangladeshi migrants missed their flights in two days since May 26 following failure of booking hotels for quarantine stay in the Middle Eastern country.

KSA itself announced on May 20 in its new travel advisory that medical insurance covering the risk of Covid-19 infections and hotel reservations for institutional quarantine must be arranged through the respective airline a traveller is flying on.

The flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines, which resumed flight services to the Middle Eastern country from May 29, after nine days of suspension, also said passengers would have to book hotels on their own.

Citing the instruction, migrant workers are claiming that the carriers are avoiding their due responsibilities.

Due to the sudden new travel advisory, several Saudi-bound expatriate workers who have already availed visas and air tickets, only awaiting their return to KSA, are now stuck in Bangladesh as time is ticking away. If they cannot reach Saudi Arabia on time, they will be in risk of losing their jobs and visas.

However, in a statement, Tarik A Alowaidi, Country Manager of Saudia in Bangladesh, assured that if any Bangladeshi passenger misses flight or needs to change flight date on different grounds, Saudia will issue fresh ticket and will accommodate them in other flights without any charge.

A spokesperson for the airline also expressed they had provided service temporarily to the Bangladeshi workers regarding hotel booking as it was new to the passengers. "But we cannot provide this service for an indefinite period as we lack necessary number of staffers to do this. Besides, it is also not our job," he said, wishing anonymity.

Also huge crowds of workers at the office premise amid the pandemic created public health risk, which is another reason the airline shifted things online, said the spokesperson.

Witnessing such a crowd at the office while being overburdened due to shortage of staff, Saudia management decided to stop providing hotel booking services for quarantine in KSA at the office from May 25.

But, many migrant workers had been wandering helplessly at Saudia' office at the capital's Karwanbazar and at Dhaka Airport for the past few days seeking solutions regarding their hotel booking but found no designated persons to help them.

According to many former top leaders of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, over 33,000 Saudi-bound migrant workers are waiting to go to Saudi Arabia in the next one month after completing their visa procedures and with tickets in their hands.

"Due to serious complexities in hotel booking, many migrant workers might fail to go to Saudi Arabia on time. In that case visas of many migrant workers might expire," said Fakhru Islam, former Finance Secretary, BAIRA and President of Recruiting Agency Welfare Organisation of Bangladesh.

Tipu Sultan, President, Recruiting Agency Oikya Parishad demanded that the Expatriates' Welfare Ministry come forward to assist the country's remittance earning workers in booking hotels.

Saudi Arabia is the largest expatriate income market for Bangladesh. At least 26 lakh migrants are working in different sectors in that country earning billions of remittance for Bangladesh.