

## "Clearance by Alpha-31": Inside Bangladesh's human trafficking crisis hampering tourism

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Dhaka : It was past 2:00 am on June 11 when 30 nervous young men entered Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, their bags light but their dreams heavy. They told officials they were going on a five-day vacation to Turkey. None had prior travel history, and most came from modest backgrounds-barbers, construction workers, and farmhands. However, their final destination was never Turkey, rather Alexandria, Egypt.

Their real route-mapped out by underground brokers-was to land in Egypt, slip into Libya, and risk a dangerous sea crossing to Italy. Each of them had paid between BDT-8 and BDT 18 lakh for the promise of a European future.

Immigration officials flagged their dubious Turkish e-visas. However, then came a phone call, and a name: "Alpha-31 has cleared them."

That single sentence ended all scrutiny. Officers wrote "OK from prosecution, concerned A-31 sir" on each boarding pass. The group was allowed to board Turkish Airlines flight TK 713 without further questions.

Man behind clearance

"Alpha-31" is the call sign of Officer-in-Charge (OC) of the Airport Immigration Police. He never signed a single form-but gave verbal approval to override standard visa screening.

Acting on that clearance was a SI, known as "Juliet 1", who ushered the group past border control. Within hours, all 30 were airborne, their forged documents safely stashed out of sight.

Istanbul trap

When TK 713 landed in Istanbul, the plan began to fall apart. Instead of proceeding to immigration, the group loitered.

Turkish officials, suspicious of their behavior, discovered that all 30 carried forged Turkish e-visas. Two men even vanished inside the terminal, alerting authorities further.

Within 48 hours, they were deported back to Dhaka on TK 712.

Cover blown

At home, immigration investigators were stunned. These were not ordinary forgeries. This was a coordinated trafficking operation, aided by a senior immigration officer.

Furthermore, the travelers were not just victims-they were part of a growing trend of Bangladeshis risking death to escape poverty via fake documents and backdoor routes.

Talking to The Bangladesh Monitor, CEO of a reputed travel agency blamed the airline staff, airport authorities, and the fraudulent travel agency for this sick human trafficking attempt. "How could anyone pass through the airport with fake visas," he wondered.

Managing Director of another legit travel agency, talking to The Bangladesh Monitor, sang a similar tune, blaming the dishonest travel agency, airport authorities, and the airline staff. Furthermore, he

mentioned a growing worry about Turkey possibly halting e-visas for Bangladeshi travelers following this incident.

Upon reaching Turkish Airlines, a representative of the flag carrier of Turkey told The Bangladesh Monitor that the airline was not behind this illegal move. According to him, the passengers were bound for Alexandria, not Istanbul. They were only transiting through Turkey onward to Egypt, but got caught when they tried to flee from Istanbul.

Therefore, they were okay to board from the Dhaka station of Turkish Airlines as they had proper travel documents, he claimed. However, that does not explain anything about the fake Turkish e-visas, or how the airline could not identify those. The airline representative did not respond to that, rather blamed the agency for the fraudulent move.

### Global repercussions: Visa doors shutting

Across Asia and the Middle East, countries are closing their doors to Bangladeshi passport holders:

1. India has slashed daily tourist visas from 7,000 to as few as 500.
2. Vietnam halted all visa issuance after uncovering 30,000+ Bangladeshi overstayers.
3. Cambodia and Laos have blocked Bangladeshi tourists after trafficking rings began using them as transit corridors.
4. Indonesia scrapped visa-on-arrival; tourist visas now take 1-1.5 months to issue.
5. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan suspended access due to forged documents and trafficking links.
6. Thailand's e-visa approvals dropped by half since January-now around 400/day, plagued by payment and group-processing issues.
7. UAE and Oman, major labor destinations, have virtually frozen hiring of Bangladeshi workers.
8. The US stopped new student visa interviews altogether in May 2025.
9. Even Turkey is now considering to make visas stricter for Bangladeshi travelers.

A once-powerful passport in South Asia now triggers suspicion in embassies across continents.

Inside HSIA: Business as usual

Despite the magnitude of the breach, there have been no arrests.

The OC (Alpha-31) was transferred, not suspended. The SI confirmed she followed his verbal orders but faced no public consequence.

No broker has been detained. No travel agency has been shut down.

Economic shock: Tourism sector bleeds

The fallout has hit Bangladesh's travel industry hard:

1. Outbound tourism has dropped by 60-80 percent since late 2024.
2. Daily flight load factors have collapsed to under 50 percent.
3. Travel tax and airport surcharges-major sources of government revenue-have halved.
4. Tour operators now struggle to send clients anywhere beyond Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Malaysia, and the Maldives.
5. Bangladesh's image as a source of low-skilled trafficked laborers and visa fraudsters has damaged diplomatic ties and crippled a once-growing middle-class leisure market.

Way forward

Experts and travel leaders are calling for urgent reform:

1. Digitalize visa screening at all exit points.
2. Blacklist fraudulent agents and online brokers.
3. Punish corrupt officers-with strict actions, not just transfers.
4. Launch a dedicated anti-trafficking task force combining APBn, NSI, CID, and border forces.
5. Repair diplomatic ties with ASEAN, Central Asia, and Gulf countries.

Until then, the "Alpha-31" incident may be remembered not just as a

scandal-but as the moment Bangladesh's entire travel and migration system lost global trust.