

## Medical travellers to India in distress, moving to other markets

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Dhaka : Many critically ill patients from Bangladesh to India are failing to keep their medical appointments, as visa approvals were first halted and later have been limited, following the earlier mass uprising that ousted the former government on August 5.

In October, Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Kumar Verma informed the media, visas are currently being issued to those who need them on an emergency basis only, due to shortage of human resources.

It may be mentioned here, the July mass uprising against the former government in Bangladesh prompted India to recall its staff from its Dhaka High Commission.

Now, doctors are worried, critically ill patients from Bangladesh to India

are falling behind on their treatment.

According to Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh, India as a destination market occupies 40-45 per cent of the total annual outbound trips from Bangladesh.

Of them, the lion's share belongs to medical travel-a staggering 80 per cent, making India the number one destination for Bangladeshi medical travellers.

Likewise, Bangladesh also comes out as the top source market for India as the country contributes 50-60 per cent to India's total medical traveller inflow, as per the knowledge-based analytical group CareEdge Ratings.

Reports said, Bangladesh occupied over 22.5 per cent of 9.23 million visitors to India in 2023, representing the largest percentage from any single nationality.

Of them, about 449,570 people from Bangladesh visited the country for medical purposes in 2023, up from 304,067 in 2022, reports added.

This led to a 48 per cent rise in medical tourist arrivals from Bangladesh in 2023, according to Nephro Care India Ltd, a renowned hospital in Kolkata.

However, the visa issues originating amid July's mass uprising against the former government dealt a huge blow, as India reportedly has been witnessing a staggering 85-90 per cent drop in Bangladeshi visitor arrivals ever since.



Dr AK Azad Khan

If the situation prolongs, the total medical traveller footfall in India from Bangladesh may further drop by 10-15 per cent in 2024, also noted reports.

Reports cited major industry players in India claiming, a significant share of their overseas medical tourists declined during the April to September period of the current financial year, with top players seeing a 25-40 per cent drop in Bangladeshi patient volume.

While talking to The Bangladesh Monitor on the sidelines of a medical exhibition in Dhaka recently, Jithu Jose, Vice President of Apollo Hospitals India, informed, Indian Hospitals, such as Apollo, have 40 years of good relations with Bangladeshi medical travellers.

The brand's hospitals, on average, serve 250-300 Bangladeshi patients daily. However, following the visa issues since the July's mass uprising, the number has gone down over 40 per cent, he sighed.

The group saw a 15 per cent drop in overall international patient revenue in the first half of the year compared to last year, due to the fall of Bangladeshi patient arrivals, further said reports.

Following the unrest in Bangladesh, there has been a significant decline in volume, and most of that decline is among lower acuity patients, some of whom would come in for health check-ups and so on, said Madhu Sasidhar, President and Chief Executive Officer, Apollo Hospitals Enterprise Ltd.



Dr MA Rashid

A representative of Manipal Group of Hospitals in Kolkata, said, "Footfall began to reduce from July 20 since the Indian Embassy at Dhaka stopped issuing visas from July 19."

"Our average footfall from Bangladesh is around 2,500 across our three hospitals in Kolkata, including OPD and IP, which has gone down to around 1,800 since agitation started in Bangladesh," further added the representative.

"It is likely to go down further in the coming days, particularly the OPD footfall," said Karthik Rajagopal, Chief Operating Officer, Manipal Hospitals.

On the other hand, Bangladesh market contributes to about five per cent of Max Healthcare's total international revenue.

However, due to the ongoing visa issues, revenue from this market has declined by 50 per cent.

Max Healthcare has an established office in Bangladesh to support patients seeking medical treatment at their hospitals, informed Anas Abdul Wajid, Senior Director and Chief Sales and Marketing Officer, Max Healthcare.

A Kolkata-based medical tourism company expressed, his company, earlier, managed around 150 Bangladeshi patients each month.

However, currently, his company is observing a huge decline as the number of patients has fallen to only 5-6 a month while many appointments have been cancelled.

### Medical travellers moving away

Due to the visa impediments currently in place, Bangladeshi travellers are shifting away from India to other nearby countries in Southeast Asia.

The market, which for so long enjoyed the number one position as the most preferred destination for medical travel, has now been toppled by other Southeast Asian countries offering quality healthcare.

During the peak of the unrest in Bangladesh, CareEdge Ratings mentioned, a considerable number of Bangladeshi medical travellers either cancelled or postponed their visits to India.

Visa issues since the unrest led to some realignment and rescheduling of travellers' travel plans. Also, as travel is being restricted between India and Bangladesh, it has become harder for Bangladeshi patients to reach their scheduled medical appointments.

Neighbours, both of whom, enjoyed plenty of connectivity during the last government's tenure, now seem quite distant to each other, as flights are down in number between the two nations, trains and buses have been cancelled, and cross-border travel poses safety issues for many.

Hence, Bangladeshi patients are currently moving away from India, seeking medical treatment abroad in other nearby countries that are renowned for healthcare like Thailand, Turkey, Singapore and Malaysia, informed Obaidullah Junaid, Co-founder of Healthtrip, while talking to The Bangladesh Monitor in Dhaka.

India used to be the top destination for Bangladeshi medical travellers until recently when Thailand took over the number one spot, according to him.



*Jithu Jose*

Lately, it is taking several months to get a medical visa to India while Thailand offers a medical visa in 3-4 working days only.

Therefore, there has been a major shift in movement of Bangladeshi medical travellers as they are now choosing Thailand over India, informed Junaid.

Country's healthcare development urged

Experts suggested the development of Bangladesh's own healthcare sector to retain patients from going abroad in the first place at a medical expo held in Dhaka recently.

Healthcare services must be made available even in remote areas across

the country through adopting new medical technology.

Dr AK Azad Khan, Chairman of Health Sector Reform Commission of the Interim Government and President of Diabetic Association of Bangladesh, said this as the chief guest during the inauguration ceremony of MEDEXPO 2024 held at InterContinental Dhaka on November 6.

According to him, the crisis of doctors and expert medical practitioners in remote areas of Bangladesh can be solved by ensuring healthcare services there through digital medical information technologies.

That is why, those involved in the sector must grow at par with the ever-changing technologies, he claimed.

However, the biggest issue prevailing in the country's healthcare sector is the lack of expert manpower, said Dr MA Rashid, Adviser-Cardiac Projects of BADAS, while addressing the event as a special guest.

In his speech, Rashid claimed, the country's healthcare sector lacks application specialists who could operate the digital medical equipment.

Hence, every time a healthcare machine breaks, we are left with no other option than bringing expert manpower from abroad to fix it, further informed the doctor.

Jithu Jose, Vice President of Apollo Hospitals; and Oliver Lawrence, Director of F&B of InterContinental Dhaka; also spoke on the occasion.

While addressing the inauguration ceremony, Kazi Wahidul Alam, Managing Director, Triune Group (organiser of MEDEXPO 2024), said, "The exhibition aims to provide various stakeholders of the healthcare and medical sectors with a platform for direct interactions among them. I sincerely hope, both the sellers and buyers of various medical equipment, products and healthcare services would benefit from the event."

MEDEXPO 2024, the three-day exhibition of healthcare and medical equipment, went on till November 8 at the Ruposhi Bangla Grand Ballroom of hotel InterContinental Dhaka.

Leading hospitals and healthcare service providers from India, Thailand and host Bangladesh along with diagnostic and medical equipment



manufacturers and suppliers showcased their latest state-of-the-art products during the exhibition.

Participating organisations offered special discounts on their products and services. Furthermore, renowned specialist doctors from local and foreign hospitals provided interested visitors with free consultations about the latest treatment methods.

On the sidelines, Apollo Hospitals Group from India hosted a health awareness seminar on November 7 at the fair premise. Topics like robotics in joint replacement and recent advances in laparoscopic surgeries were discussed by experts.