

Case Study Series: Learning from Innovative and Proactive Civil Servants

Case Title:

The Misery of the Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in Malaysia: Verification Process Made Easy to Expedite their Return to Home

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The cases for this series are collected by interviewing the civil servants working in different South Asian countries. This collection initiative is an attempt to document different innovative initiatives taken by different civil servants and encourage other civil servants to be more proactive and innovative through the ideas of these cases. If you know of any innovative case, then please send us an email (farin.ritu@northsouth.edu), we will communicate with you for further details.

The Misery of the Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in Malaysia: Verification Process Made Easy to Expedite their Return to Home

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The Plight of Illegal Migrants from Bangladesh

Problem

Complex citizenship verification procedures add to the plight of illegal Bangladeshi migrants living in Malaysia.

Solution

Increasing the efficiency of the verification by using a new channel which has fewer steps (direct contact with the High Commission by the *Upazila* Nirbahi Officer) and adopting a new way of verification (use of National ID from the *Upazila* Election Office).

Outcome

Drastic reduction in wait times for migrants stranded overseas, decreased gatekeeping, use of technology leading to quicker repatriation.

The case centers around unauthorized migration in Malaysia. There is a tendency among some of the marginalized peoples living in coastal areas like Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh to try to migrate to other countries through illegal means in search of better economic opportunities by using sea routes. Many of them pay good sums of money to human trafficking profiteers—often selling off the only asset these already poor individuals own, and travel to nearby countries without any legal document or passport. Eventually, many of them are caught by the Malaysian authorities and are imprisoned under inhumane conditions facing immediate deportation. The deportation procedure is made even more difficult since they lack proper documentation for the Malaysian authorities with which to determine their country of origin properly.

The Continuation of Misery: Problematic Verification Procedures and the Inter-organization Coordination Gap

As per the protocol, lists of illegal migrants in Malaysia - claiming to be of Bangladeshi origins - are sent to the Security Services Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs from the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh and then to the Special Branch (SB) office. From there, it is sent to the Police Super, District Special Branch (DSB), and eventually to *Upazila* level law enforcement authorities to initiate a background check; afterward, an investigating officer is assigned who goes to the addresses of the claimants, checks their background, citizenship status, criminal history, etc.

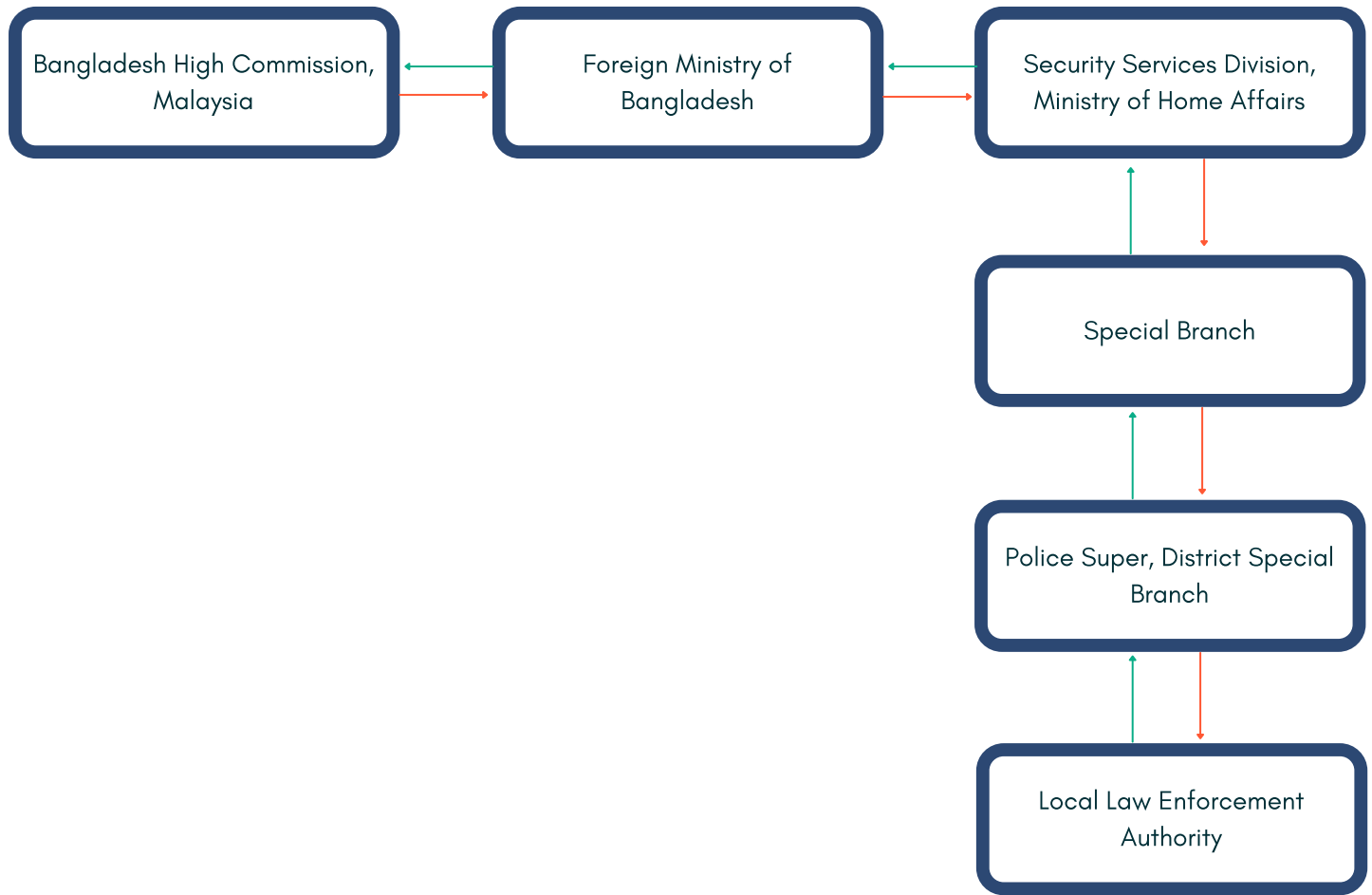


Figure 1: Regular Standard Procedure*

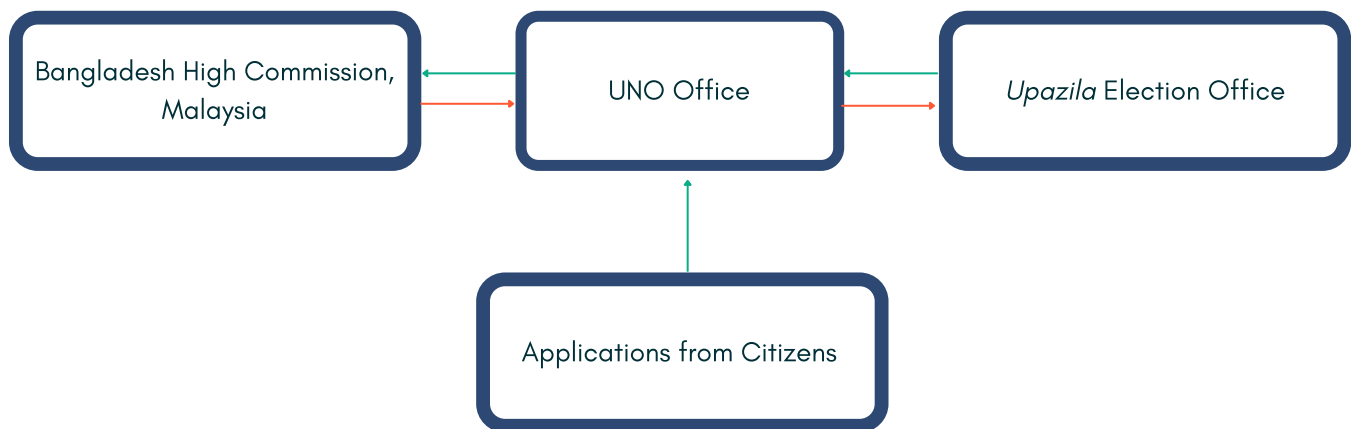


Figure 2: Reduced steps due to the initiative of Mr. X

* The verification procedure described in this case has been cross-checked with a former foreign secretary, higher officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs, field administration, and Bangladesh Police. We came across different versions of the procedure as it is often subject to flexibility. Here the most common procedure has been presented.

But, unfortunately, in Bangladesh, it is exceedingly difficult to get these things done, made worse by allegations of harassment and bribing. The situation is aggravated in rural areas which is where most claimants come from, and for that reason, their families tend not to have the financial capability to push these investigations in the right direction. Consequently, when reporting back to the authority, there are allegations claiming that the assigned investigating officers do not provide satisfactory reports. Once these incomplete and flawed investigative reports are sent back, providing the Foreign Ministry with nothing other than ambiguity. As a result, the Malaysian government is then unable to detain Bangladeshis come back to their country. And sadly, even when proper background checks are done, the process of bringing illegal migrants to Bangladesh is too complex and time-consuming due to the coordination gap among the different authorities concerned, taking over a year for most cases to be processed.

An Initiative to Ease the Verification Process

Our subject is Mr. X, a public servant by profession and working as a UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) in that *Upazila* of Cox's Bazar district when the story unfolds. An issue was brought to Mr. X's attention by one of his acquaintances, Ms. Y who was working in Bangladesh's High Commission in Kuala Lumpur at that time. After finding out that people within his jurisdiction had been stranded overseas for long periods of time and that their families had been suffering as a result, Mr. X felt that he should do something to ease the situation. To address these unfortunate fortune-seekers' plight and ease the whole process, initially, Mr. X tried to involve local public representatives in that region, but this proved to be unsuccessful.

After strategizing with Ms. Y, he decided to ask the family members of the arrested individuals to submit an application addressed directly to his office. Instead of following the usual channels, he decided to go through the Upazila Election Office that works as a digital repository of individual-level personal data at the *Upazila* level and hosts information regarding citizens' photographs, addresses, dates of birth, and National Identification Numbers (NID).

In this way, all applications were verified and cross-checked, and the valid ones were reported back by Mr. X to Ms. Y directly. Surprisingly, Ms. Y managed to complete the process within just 48 hours. As a result of their intention and their initiative to coordinate in innovative ways, over the course of 3 years, around 4,000 to 5,000 residents from the *Upazila* could return home and reunite with their families.

From this case, we see that a proactive civil servant was prudent enough to address an issue by taking an unconventional path, using digital means and coordinating with other branches of the government, making the door-to-door checking process obsolete. If Mr. X and Ms. Y had not approached this crucial and delicate matter in the unusual way that they did, the suffering of those people would have continued for much longer. But, as we see, from their compassionate and innovative leadership, the families were able to reunite in the shortest possible time.

About the Authors

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