

“Yes, We can!”

Syed Ahsan Habib

Chairman

iPeople Limited

[An Associate of IRIS JV]



After a frantic scramble over a month and a half to meet a daunting deadline, Bangladesh has reached a notable landmark — the first machine-readable passport has been handed over to an applicant. This is a technological breakthrough worth celebrating.

With the introduction of Machine Readable Travel Documents (MRTD), Bangladesh crossed an important threshold in advanced technology. MRTDs represent the cutting edge of state-of-the-art security technology. In these troubled times, with global terror threats presenting increasing risk in international travel, conventional Bangladeshi passports that were issued until now are no longer considered secure enough, and ICAO had given an ultimatum to Bangladesh to introduce travel documents with sophisticated safeguards, in other words, machine-readable passports and visas, to ensure that Bangladeshis could travel abroad without hindrance.

In my role as one of the key enablers in realizing the ambitious program to introduce MRTDs, I had a privileged perch. Let me share some of the insights I gained.

One cannot commend highly enough our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s farsighted vision of a Digital Bangladesh. In today’s fast-moving globalized world, bringing Bangladesh up to the speed on information technology is critical if we wish to tap the vast opportunities offered by the global economy.

To be sure, the MRTD technology *per se* is not indigenous. An international consortium of companies from nations as far apart as Poland and Malaysia came together under our aegis to bring this project to fruition. Having said that, this is a significant breakthrough for the nation all the same. For our MRP project team which brought this challenging project to reality, it’s been a tough, stressful, but ultimately exhilarating and rewarding ride.

April 1, 2010 was the ICAO deadline to introduce machine readable passports and visas, thus bringing down the curtain on traditional handwritten passports. The tender was floated on September 15, 2009 and bids were received in the last week of October 2009. Though the target was to award the contract by the first week of December 2009 but due to reasons best known to the authority the work order was awarded to IRIS JV, the lowest responsive bidder, only on February 17, 2010.

We had all of 42 days to put in place a system in a nation which issues over two million passports per year, while at the same time ensuring that the passports met the most exacting security standards. And, we did it. It was a tough ask, but the most rewarding part of our experience was how several key people stepped up to the plate and helped us meet a daunting challenge. Credit is due to too many people to allow mentioning them all, so here are just a few people of the many without whose passion and commitment the project would not have been successful.

Project Director Brigadier General Md. Refayet Ullah's motivation has been exemplary; Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder brought a committed determination to navigate through any and all hurdles at full speed; Abdul Mabud, the energetic Director General of the Department of Immigration and Passports, gave us his unstinting support. Crucial to our efforts was the Prime Minister's robust backing, empowering the team to meet the challenge, cutting through bureaucratic red tapes.

The private arm of the project, IRIS JV, is comprised of Malaysia's IRIS Corporation Berhad, Poland's PWPW, and Bangladesh's dataedge Limited. A local conglomerate, iPeople Limited was the catalyst behind the entire venture.

A dedicated team raced against time to complete a complicated and demanding project that included designing of the passport booklets and visa stickers, air-freighting in and installing the required machinery, commissioning of the equipment, linking the regional passport offices by optical fibers, and training carefully recruited and screened manpower to run the project flawlessly. It would be unfair on my part if I don't mention my teammates - Noor Chowdhury of dataedge, Quik Choo of IRIS, and Ziggy Matera of PWPW – the people who worked ungodly hours through difficult conditions only to meet the ICAO deadline absolutely on-time and thus helped our Hon'ble Prime Minister fulfill her pledge to her citizens.

Consider the broader context. Bangladesh is not the first country that springs to mind when one thinks of a nation where a complex, cutting-edge system for a high tech passport and visa system can be put in place in 42 days flat. Yet that's exactly what we did. The success of this project underscores the fact that we in Bangladesh have got what it takes to put together any cutting-edge project.

This is a moment of pride for Bangladesh. One is tempted to borrow the rallying cry of U.S. President Barack Obama's election campaign: "Yes, We can!"

[Published on 2nd June 2010]