

Counsellors put a human face on evacuation missions

By [Dr Shazalina Zainul Abidin](#) - November 3, 2024 @ 12:01am



Part of the 129 Malaysians evacuated from Bangladesh at Kuala Lumpur International Airport Terminal 2 on July 23. NSTP PIC BY EIZAIRI SHAMSUDIN

ON July 23 this year, Malaysia mounted one of its rare evacuation missions.

It is considered rare because, almost always, whenever we needed to rescue Malaysians, it would always be in stages, and very rarely en masse.

Look at the evacuation of Malaysians from Lebanon last month: the 22 or so citizens were taken out in four phases, all using commercial airlines.

The last time Malaysia conducted an evacuation, as far as I know, was in 2020 for Malaysians in Iran, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

That evacuation was recounted by the Malaysian ambassador to Iran at the time, in the Foreign Ministry's book, *Diplomacy Through the Pandemic*.

All the other rescues were "repatriations", not "evacuations". There is a subtle difference, but it is significant nonetheless.

In one, we move people gradually through a pre-existing commercial transport.

In the other, we clear out everyone by sending a chartered plane.

What many do not realise is that many factors are considered, in addition to the safety of the Malaysians.

We look at the security of the airport, whom do we ask for permission to land, how volatile is the situation on the ground, and even whether there are enough Malaysians who want to be rescued.

The most important factor to be considered, before a decision to evacuate is made, is whether the tipping point has been reached.

This is always easier in hindsight than it is when conflicting information comes in because the situation is so fluid.

The evacuation of Malaysians from Bangladesh was unique all on its own.

First, once the decision to evacuate was made on July 21, everything came together almost like magic.

The "what if" discussions were held informally that Sunday.

The prime minister had already given his consent if the foreign minister decided that an evacuation was needed.

The high commissioner and her team were ready to implement the plan, and the ministry's operations room was already in full swing.

Secondly, this was the first time that the ministry had an updated standard operating procedure to follow.

In 2022, the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations had embarked on a year-long project to fine-tune the ministry's line of communication during a crisis.

The project included developing a crisis simulation, which was then used for training purposes.

The updated SOP became the guiding document for the Bangladesh evacuation.

The most striking innovation in this SOP was the inclusion of a counsellor for the next of kin to handle the emotional side of the process.

All too often, the human aspect of an exercise is ignored, and this leads to problems: dissatisfaction, disgruntlement and miscommunication.

At the operations room, the team included two counsellors of the ministry, whose task it was to speak to the parents of the Malaysian students stranded in Bangladesh.

The day after the operations room was opened, the Department of Higher Education sent its counsellors to help out and man the phone lines.

Where political officers like me were curt and straight to the point, this cadre of psychologists took the time to build rapport and gain the trust of the families, who were understandably worried about their loved ones.

On the day of the evacuation, at the airport, it was heartwarming to see these counsellors "connect" with the people they had spoken to only over the telephone.

As everyone anxiously waited for the first of the passengers to alight, the counsellors could be seen allaying fears, making small talk and attending to family members.

Almost three months after the 129 Malaysians were evacuated, Bangladesh was once again back on the Malaysian radar.

On Oct 4, the prime minister's plane landed at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka, carrying him, two ministers, two deputy ministers, two members of parliament, and a group of senior officials.

This time, the mission was not to evacuate, but to reaffirm Malaysia's support for the work of the interim government in putting Bangladesh back on track.

For their part in the evacuation's success, I would like to extend a big thank you to Nazuha Shamsuddin, who led the counselling team; Professor Datuk Azlinda Azman, who sent the higher education team to assist; and Datuk Shushilil Azam, whose messages and responses were invaluable to the mission.

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