

## Nalin and Prisha: Bangladeshi Chefs in Yemen



*Migrant workers evacuated from Yemen receive arrival assistance by IOM staff at the airport in Dhaka. © Saiful Islam Shaheen, IOM Bangladesh, 2015*

45-year-old Nalin is from a village in Bhiarab, Bangladesh. Fifteen years ago as a young man of 30, he went abroad to seek a better life for himself and for his family. In 2000, Nalin arrived in Sana'a, Yemen, where he found work as a chef in a diplomatic mission. He was lucky that it only took him a month to find work and he was able to keep the job at the Embassy throughout his time in Yemen. He can cook South Asian, European and Arabian food, and can speak Arabic, Bengali and English.

He regularly sent money to his parents, and to his siblings back home. His parents were able to build a bigger house and pay his siblings' tuition fees with the money he sent. Nalin married in 2005 and was able to take his wife Prisha with him to Yemen, where they began to build a decent life for themselves. Nalin and Prisha's story was a good one; they had a stable and steady income, safe and secure living arrangements and enough savings to go home to Bangladesh every two years. They also had a son and were living a Bangladeshi labour migrant's dream.

Then it all started to go horribly wrong. First, the Embassy closed down and its diplomatic staff were evacuated. All the other staff were left to fend for themselves and for eight months Nalin had no income. But he had savings and a roof over his head and was hopeful of finding work again soon. When the bombing campaign began in March 2015, things rapidly took a turn for the worst. He witnessed firsthand the devastation of war - within a few short months, nothing in his neighbourhood was functional; there was no gas, no electricity, no usable roads. Buildings crumbled all around him, and all day and night, the incessant sound of gunfire and mortars pierced the atmosphere. He saw broken lives and shattered bodies lying by the roadside and became consumed by a desperate need to get out of Yemen.

One morning he took his family and left their home and all their belongings to head for the Indian Embassy, from where, he had heard, Indian nationals were being evacuated *en masse*. There is no Bangladeshi Embassy in Yemen so the Indian Embassy was the next best thing. Nalin had hoped to go to India from where he would make his way home to Bangladesh. But it turned out to be a lost cause as his case was not treated by the Indians, who were only dealing with their own nationals at the time, and he had to virtually camp outside the Embassy with other Bangladeshis hoping that their luck might change. All around the sound of war could be heard. He recalls those uncertain time with dread:

“My wife became severely traumatized by the events. She has still not recovered fully and had to be admitted to the ICU in a Bangladeshi hospital when we managed to get home. My son too gets terrified every time a trucks passes by and the ground shakes.”

For four weeks they camped outside the Indian Embassy, eating into their savings and praying for a miracle. Nalin recalls how kind the Yemeni people were to them, offering them water and food, even when they themselves were desperate and nearly destitute, and letting them use the facilities in their homes.

Finally, through the Bangladeshi network, Nalin and Prisha heard that IOM was evacuating stranded migrants in conflict zones and managed to get in touch with someone there. They were flown to Sudan and spent a week in a Sudanese refugee camp before being flown to Dubai and then onward to Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Nalin has been back in Bangladesh for eight months now and is still without a job. He says it's hard in Bangladesh to get anything because of bureaucratic hurdles and unreliable structures. He has no money left and wants to go back to Yemen when the conflict stops to see what can be salvaged of their lives, but he doubts they will be able to find much.

When recounting his experience he says:

“We didn't know that things could get so bad so fast. It took us completely by surprise and we had no time to do anything but get out of there with our lives and eight kilos of luggage each.”