Sri Lankan government fails to investigate deaths of migrant workers

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There is a rising death toll among the large number of Sri Lankans, many of them women, who work in the Middle East as a means of trying to deal with financial hardships at home. Yet the Colombo government and state authorities have demonstrated a callous indifference toward the fate of these women and have failed to carry out any serious investigation into the circumstances of the deaths.

According to statistics kept by the Katunayake International Airport (KIA), Sri Lanka's main international airport, and the Foreign Employment Bureau (FEB), a government agency dealing with migrant workers, the bodies of 215 workers were returned to the country during 2002. Among them were 107 women. From January to mid-October 2003, 203 bodies arrived—131 of them female. During the first two weeks of October alone, 15 female deaths were recorded.

Most cases are simply categorised as "natural deaths". Only a few are listed as suicides, homicides or accidents. However, friends and relatives concerned about the fate of their loved ones accuse the government and the FEB of accepting without question the reasons given by employers or the authorities in countries where they were employed.

The Sri Lankan government has every reason for wanting to cover up these deaths. It does not want to disrupt what is one of the country's largest foreign exchange earners. In 2002, remittances were worth $US1.1 billion to Sri Lanka in foreign exchange and in 2003, the figure reached $1.2 billion.

According to the Central Bank Annual Report for 2002, around 204,000 Sri Lankans were working as cheap labour in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, UAE, and Qatar. Nearly 165,000 or 65 percent were women and 53 percent were working as housemaids.

When the WSWS interviewed FEB chairman Susantha Fernando about the deaths, he immediately sought to minimise the problem, blaming the media for "blowing the issue out of proportion". He merely reiterated the answers provided by employers, police and other authorities in the Middle East.

"When compared with the death rates in Sri Lanka, the rate among Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East is low, about 2 per 1,000. Most of the deaths have occurred due to natural reasons," Fernando said. However, most female workers are young—under 45 years—and were in good health when recruited. Private employment agencies that hire workers insist on medical tests.

When asked whether the FEB carried out proper investigations, Fernando was slippery. He cited a long list of reasons why such inquiries could not take place: some deaths occurred far from the country's capital; officials have to accompany police from that country; local authorities accept what the employers say; and so on.

Fernando explained only "suspicious cases" are investigated. Even the request of family members is not enough—the FEB must be satisfied that the cases warrant an inquiry. He promised to provide access to some of the investigation reports. But the next day FEB officials, acting on his instructions, refused, saying the details were "very sensitive".

It is not difficult to understand why. The WSWS spoke to the relatives of some of the dead women about the conditions that workers face and the circumstances of their deaths. What they described provides a glimpse of the systematic exploitation of millions of workers—from Sri Lanka and other countries—and the official whitewash that takes place if they die.

Kandiah Nandanee, 24, from Wattala worked in Lebanon for 10 months in 2002 as a housemaid. When her body was returned to Sri Lanka, her family was told she had committed suicide by jumping off the fifth floor of an apartment block. Her mother Susila Kandiah told the WSWS, however, that her daughter had no reason to take her life. Nandanee's body had a fracture to the head and damage to one eye. Susila has no way of verifying what actually happened to her daughter.

"My daughter passed her advanced level [high school certificate] but could not get proper employment. She worked in a tea packing company for 75 rupees [about 80

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US cents] a day. Nandanee wanted to buy a piece of land and build a house. I did not agree but what we could do?" She was able to get a job in Lebanon by paying the agency half of the money job charged and promising the rest from her salary.

W.A. Chithrani from Wathugedara in southern Sri Lanka died in 1992 while working in Dubai. The cause of death was given as accidental burning. But her brother was always suspicious. "We were informed that two other girls died along with my sister. One was a Filipino girl. When I asked at the Philippines Embassy, they told us that no such incident was reported to them," he said.

Chithrani's brother had also worked overseas. He had seen two or three corpses at the mortuary of the Sulfican Hospital in Kuwait each time he went there. "Some embassy officials do not care about anything, especially about deaths. If the employer gives them a bribe and asks them not to divulge information then they oblige," he explained angrily.

"Both in the Middle East and Sri Lanka, employment agencies exploit poor people. From the stage of applying for a passport they start to charge applicants," he said. "Once they start work, the conditions are often difficult. If female workers try to complain to the agency, they are threatened and sometimes beaten to get them to go back to the same house."

L.P. Dhanawathi came from the same remote village of Wathugedara and died only a week after arriving in Saudi Arabia in 1998. There was no time for her to send an address or a telephone number where she lived.

"It took five months to get her body here," her sister explained. "We tried the Red Cross, the FEB and a parliamentarian as well, but all in vain. My husband was also working in Saudi Arabia and so we were eventually able to get my sister's body. The death certificate said she died of a heart attack. But she was not suffering with any serious illnesses. We cannot believe it. She underwent all the required medical tests before she left."

The case of W.M.A. Abeykoon Menike was reported in the Sri Lankan media. She went to work in Dubai five months after her marriage. She began work in July 2002 but died in suspicious circumstances on November 11 the same year. She had told her husband by phone that her employer was cruel. She had not been paid for the period she was employed.

Significantly, the Colombo coroner M. Ashroff Rumy, who performed a postmortem once her body was returned to Sri Lanka, could not reach a conclusion on the cause of death. His postmortem report gave the cause of death as multiple injuries and an injury pattern consistent with falling from a height. The FEB carried out no investigation.

There are no rules or regulations for the protection of overseas workers. Each worker is levied 5,200 rupees for insurance coverage but no adequate compensation is paid in the case of deaths. Relatives who spoke to the WSWS accused the FEB of being a corrupt institution that provided no protection for workers.

Dheepa Vajirani from Maravila, about 40 kilometres from Colombo, said she was anxiously waiting for information about her sister for six months. "I went twice to this office [the FEB] to make a complaint. On both occasions, I was told that they had sent a fax and that my sister would soon come with some money. I felt that the particular officer had taken a bribe. The officials have a contemptuous attitude towards the problems facing workers."

The president of the Campaign to Protect Migrant Workers Rights, Shriyani Pathirage, told a press conference late last year that there were 7,100 complaints from female workers in the 10 months to October. Of those, 240 involved sexual abuse, 44 involved rape and 1,859 related to the non-payment of wages. In other cases, workers were forced to work long shifts, given insufficient food and not allowed to bathe. Physical abuse included assaults and beatings, burning with a hot iron, knife or water, deliberate starving for days and being pushed down stairs.

Labour Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe made clear the Sri Lankan government's attitude. He told the BBC in November that the government "has been taking these issues up with the relevant authorities" and receiving "positive" responses. In the same breath, however, he explained that nothing would be done to disturb the lucrative trade by demanding better conditions for workers. "We are not in a position to say 'look here—ensure that all of these things are in place, otherwise we will not send our people'," he said.

It is not surprising therefore that even in cases where suspicious deaths occur, the government has done nothing to insist on a full investigation.

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