

Another unexplained death of a Sri Lankan worker in Saudi Arabia

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Each year hundreds of Sri Lankans die while working abroad, mainly in the Middle East. Official inquiries are rarely conducted, either in the country where the death occurred or by the Sri Lankan government.

According to the Sri Lankan Foreign Employment Bureau, 245 workers died while working in the Middle East in 2004, an increase by 12.9 percent from the 217 deaths in 2003. In 2005, 203 deaths were reported, of which 104 were women.

The official causes of death included natural causes, homicide and suicide. Many, however, are put down as “workplace accidents” or “road accidents,” despite unanswered questions about the circumstances.

G.H. Manel, 38, from Weharagalatenna village in the central hills of Sri Lanka, is one such case. Her husband W.A. Sumithrapala spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about her death while working as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia. “It will be a great thing if the news on what happened to my wife can reach the world,” he said.

Manel left for Riyadh on December 26, 2004, with the aim of earning sufficient money to ease the family’s financial difficulties. It was the third time she had travelled abroad to work. Just over 11 months later, on December 1, 2005, her dead body was returned to Sri Lanka.

Manel was survived by her husband, a daughter, 18, and three sons, aged 16, 14 and 10. Her father, G.H. Layaneris, 72, is a retired railway worker. Her mother is G.H. Misinona, aged 65. Her three brothers and two sisters are all married and struggling financially.

In Weharagalatenna, 95 percent of the villagers live by farming or working as day labourers on other people’s farms. Sumithrapala and Manel did not own any land suitable for cultivating. Sumithrapala did odd jobs. Manel had no permanent work. Like thousands of others in Sri Lanka, working overseas was one of the few options available.

Sumithrapala went to South Korea in 1994 to work as a labourer. He earned enough money to build a new home, replacing the family’s previous wattle and daub hut. Upon returning, he leased a van, hoping to start a small business.

But work was scarce and the finance company seized the vehicle when he was unable to meet the monthly leasing installments.

In 2001, Manel worked in Saudi Arabia. However, the pay was only 3,000 rupees (\$US29) a month, so she returned to Sri Lanka after just three months. In 2002 she obtained a job in Jordan. She was paid 6,000 rupees per month and was able to save 3,000. She returned to Weharagalatenna after saving 40,000 rupees.

The family was soon confronted with new financial difficulties and decided that one of them should go overseas again. Sumithrapala and Manel both applied for a foreign employment visa and decided that whoever got the first job opportunity would go.

Manel was offered work in Riyadh. Her foreign employment agent was the Alsafa agency in Badulla, which is registered with the state-run Sri Lankan Foreign Employment Bureau (FEB). Her employer was a Saudi woman named Nooru Alsa Ali.

Manel’s work involved baby-sitting and other domestic duties. In April 2005, she sent 34,000 rupees to her family. Following that, however, she was not able to send a single rupee. In a telephone conversation with her parents, she complained that she was receiving her mail late. On October 30, Manel told her parents that she was owed seven months salary, but had been told by her employer that she would be paid for only one month.

She also asked her parents not to try to contact her by telephone or letter because it was angering her employer. Over the next two weeks, Manel’s family had no word from her.

On November 12, the sister of a friend of Manel’s, who was also working as a housemaid in Riyadh, came to her parents’ home with terrible news. The friend had asked an Indian driver working for Manel’s employer whether she was all right, as she had not seen her for several days. The driver said that Manel had been killed in a road accident on November 1 and that her body was in a Riyadh hospital morgue. Manel’s friend visited the hospital and made a

positive identification.

Manel's employer had not bothered to inform her family or employment agent. Manel's husband and her brothers rushed to the Alsafa office in Badulla and told them of the news. The agency contacted the Sri Lankan embassy in Saudi Arabia to have Manel's death officially confirmed and make arrangements to transport her body back to Sri Lanka. The family had to spend over 60,000 rupees to transport Manel's body from Colombo airport to Bandarawela and to pay for her funeral. They received only 10,000 rupees from the FEB.

Sumithrapala described the experience: "I went to the foreign employment bureau with officials from the [Alsafa] agency. There was a large notebook with the names of those who have died during foreign employment. The [relatives] who receive 10,000 rupees [for the deceased workers] have to sign in that book. I only learnt that day that so many Sri Lankans have died during foreign employment."

No investigation was conducted in Saudi Arabia into Manel's death. Sumithrapala and other family members suspect that they have not been told the truth about how and when she died. Manel's parents-in-law told the WWS: "The agency says that she met with an accident when she went out with [her employer's] child. But the [employer's] driver said she went out on her own business and met with an accident. What is the truth? Also, they said that she died on November 1, but her death certificate states the death happened on November 8."

Sri Lankan government authorities have treated the family's suspicions and financial difficulties with indifference. Manel had taken out insurance with the FEB and paid the required fees. Five months after her death, however, Sumithrapala and their children are yet to be paid the 300,000 rupees in compensation they are entitled to.

Sumithrapala explained: "The insurance firm in Sri Lanka told me that her death certificate sent from Riyadh is not enough to get the insurance claim. They wanted a certificate from the FEB or another Sri Lankan authority. I got a death certificate from the FEB on January 16 and submitted it, but am yet to receive the compensation."

Sumithrapala desperately needs the money to clear the large debt involved in Manel's funeral. The Alsafa agency has provided no help. "The agency turned its back on me", he said, "after I told a newspaper [*Lankadeepa*] that my wife's death was a mystery. The agency official asked me why I had made such a statement. He returned all the documents to me and told me to deal with the FEB myself."

Sumithrapala condemned the Sri Lankan authorities for not taking any steps to investigate Manel's death or force her Saudi employer to pay the family her outstanding wages. "The government should take the responsibility for the

welfare of workers abroad," he said. "I believe that a lot of the harassment that women face would then decline."

The *Annual Report 2005* issued by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka last week noted: "Women have continued to accept migrant jobs as house maids ... due to lack of employment opportunities at home and with the hope of accumulating significant savings. This is in spite of increasing high risks encountered in the workplace and problems in their own families."

Successive governments have done nothing to address the problem. A seminar was held on April 16-17 in the Dubai Renaissance Hotel, ostensibly to canvas how to "enhance welfare measures" for Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East. The seminar was chaired by Sri Lankan Labour Relations and Foreign Employment Minister, Athauda Seneviratne, but welfare was barely discussed.

The seminar focused instead on touting for higher paid jobs in the region for Sri Lankans. The Sri Lankan Consul General in Saudi Arabia, M. Inamullah, declared that "his endeavour was to find employment for Sri Lankans ... as skilled workers, technologists and professionals, instead of as domestic servants and unskilled labourers in new economic zones and new hospitals."

The prime concern of the Sri Lankan government is to maximise the earnings repatriated to boost the Sri Lankan economy, not to improve the often terrible circumstances of thousands of guest workers in the Middle East. The majority are men and women like Sumithrapala and Manel, who are driven by poverty to work overseas and are treated as little more than slave labour, suffering abuse and, in far too many cases, injury or death.



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