

Sri Lankan government abandons thousands of citizens trapped in Lebanon

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Up to 90,000 Sri Lankans, the largest group of migrant workers from poor countries in Lebanon, have been trapped by the US-backed Israeli military assault. One Sri Lankan woman, 28-year-old Vijitha Mallika, has been killed but many others are feared dead or injured. Despite this, the Sri Lankan government has turned its back on its citizens.

Neither Sri Lankan President Rajapakse, who is chairman of the Sri Lanka Committee for Solidarity with Palestine, nor his government, has issued a statement protesting the assaults on Lebanon, Gaza Strip or the West Bank. Rajapakse's silence over the US-backed Israeli war assault is aimed at securing Washington's support for Colombo's war preparations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Moreover, the Sri Lankan government has bluntly declared that it wants its citizens to remain in Lebanon and will only repatriate those who specifically request help. Up to now only 264 Sri Lankan workers have been repatriated, some of them having organised their own escape to Damascus in Syria, from where they were flown to Colombo.

Foreign Employment Bureau (FEB) chairman Jagath Wellawatta claimed that it was "logistically very, very difficult to get in contact with that many people." He admitted, however, that Sri Lanka had few officials in Lebanon. "We don't know where people are staying or if they are injured or not," he said.

Last week Sri Lanka's ambassador to Lebanon, Amanual Farooq, said that the Sri Lankan government could not provide any transport for those trapped in south Lebanon and that migrant workers had to make their own way to Beirut. No advice or explanation was provided about how to do that. In other words, the Rajapakse government has simply abandoned these workers to their fate.

This was made abundantly clear last week by Sri

Lankan labour relations minister Athauda Seneviratne who said that the government would assist, "only if need arises and if there are requests from the people".

Yesterday Seneviratne told a Colombo press conference that the government did not want Sri Lankans in Lebanon to return home and that local families should stop urging loved ones to do so.

"I don't think a large number of people want to come back. They are used to (conflict)," Seneviratne cynically claimed. "The problem is that people here telephone them and ask them to return. If these people don't call, they will not return.... I want to make sure that we send another 400,000 workers to the Middle East this year."

As Seneviratne makes clear, the government's primary concern is not the health and safety of its citizens but the foreign exchange that they earn.

About one million Sri Lankans are working abroad, most of them in the Middle East, providing Sri Lanka's second largest source of foreign exchange. Lebanon pays the lowest salaries compared to other Middle Eastern countries, so most of the Sri Lankans workers trapped there are from the most impoverished rural families.

Vijitha Mallika, the Sri Lankan woman officially confirmed dead, for example, was from a very poor family in Balapitiya, near Galle. Two of her sisters are still in Lebanon.

Although there are no accurate official figures, Sri Lankans in Lebanon are mostly employed as housemaids, domestic workers, labourers and drivers, with large numbers located in southern Lebanon, the centre of the Israeli attacks, and therefore unable to communicate with Sri Lanka. According to Sri Lanka's international postal service division, 60,000 letters sent by Sri Lankans to their relatives and friends in Lebanon will be returned because of flight cancellations.

The government's callous indifference is further underlined by the pittance it has allocated to those

affected. Last week, the FEB announced that money for food, temporary shelter, health, local transport, etc., would be made available, but the total amount is only Rs.2.5 million (\$US25,000).

According to the latest reports, there are hundreds of Sri Lankans camping at the Sri Lankan embassy in Beirut and in temporary shelters arranged by welfare organisations.

Padma, a 22-year-old domestic helper, told the BBC that her employer did not want her to leave and had confiscated her passport. “They won’t give us our passports. They want me to continue working here and they won’t pay the rest of my salary if I go now,” she said. “I have been working for one-and-a-half years in Lebanon but I have only got three months pay.”

Another woman worker, Menika, 21, explained that she desperately wanted to return to Sri Lanka but her employers were afraid she could be killed by Israeli bombs and would not let her leave unless the Sri Lankan embassy organised a car to take her to Beirut. “Who is going to come here? The roads are so damaged,” she said. “There is hardly any way in or out.”

She explained that there had been heavy bombing every night: “Someone was killed in a neighborhood close by. I just want to go home. I want to see Sri Lanka.”

Another domestic worker, Hemalatha, 30, said that her employers had simply left her at a refuge. “I have been dumped here,” she said. “My husband is blind and I have to support my children. There is no work for me back home.”

International Organisation of Migrants (IOM) spokeswoman Jemina Pandya told the BBC that the IOM was attempting to assist migrants from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Moldova, but many domestic workers had no money or documents. The organisation said that it had limited funds and was only able to help about 300 Sri Lankans.

Pandya said the IOM could only assist those in the most difficult situations. “Forty-six of these,” she said, “are in the Sri Lankan embassy, which is very close to a Lebanese military base and being bombarded all the time.”

Many of the Sri Lankan migrants who have been able to leave Lebanon, most only carrying their passports and the clothes they were wearing, have recounted harrowing stories.

Dulani Tharanga from Chilaw who was working in south Lebanon, told last weekend’s *Sunday Times*: “There was an attack without any warning. The glass around us shattered and we felt the building was collapsing. I was on

the fifth floor with the lady of the house and her two children. When the aerial attack started we decided to make a dash to the basement. When we started going down the stairs more bombs started to fall.”

“We managed to get to the basement. But I felt it wasn’t safe there either. As I got out of the building there was another attack and the building was directly hit. I ran out in time. All I had with me was my passport and a small telephone index.” She was afraid to go back and see what happened to the family she was working for.

She added: “I just walked on. All the buildings were damaged and there were bodies lying around and vehicles burning. I managed to stop a taxi and go to Beirut. I had 100 US dollars and my passport with me. The taxi ride cost me about \$US25 dollars.”

Jayalath Kumara arrived at Colombo airport on Friday. He told the media that he had seen many buildings destroyed by Israeli bombs and had heard that many Sri Lankans had been killed during the air raids.

Sunday Times journalists reported that labour relations minister Seneviratne, who was at the airport, interrupted Kumara, claiming that these were unverified reports.

Seneviratne’s intervention indicates that the Rajapakse government is desperately trying to suppress information about the real situation in Lebanon.

Muslims held demonstrations after Friday prayers last week in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo and several places in the country’s eastern province. Protestors shouted, “Stop Israeli state terrorism! Death to America! Death to Israel.”

These protests indicate that while the Rajapakse government is callously indifferent to the fate of its own citizens, there is growing opposition to the Israeli military assault and increasing concerns about the plight of the Sri Lankans in Lebanon.



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