

Sri Lankan government leaves migrant workers stranded in Lebanon

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After weeks of war in Lebanon, the Sri Lankan government has done virtually nothing to assist more than 90,000 migrant workers, many of them young women, stranded in the war-torn country.

Only about 4,000 Sri Lankans have been able to return home. Thousands are languishing at the Sri Lankan embassy in Beirut. The *Peninsula online* website reported on August 6 that the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) had evacuated 761 people from Sri Lanka and the Philippines trapped in Lebanon.

In Colombo, parents and relatives flocked to the office of the Foreign Employment Bureau (FEB), desperate for news of their loved ones. Although one death has been reported so far, such is the chaos and devastation in Lebanon that more may be dead or injured.

Mary Kathelina from the Christian charity Caritas told *Ravaya* that there may be more deaths as many Sri Lankan women worked in the areas subjected to massive bombing. On August 3, two injured women—Arrosha Kumari and S.M. Sudumanike—arrived in Sri Lanka among other returnees.

Asked by the WSWs what was being done for the workers, FEB deputy general manager L.K. Ruhunuge said the embassy had appealed to employers to send their housemaids wanting to leave to its office. Reflecting the official contempt for these workers, he added: “We cannot collect them from the villages. They have to walk to the embassy. I met one woman who walked three hours to the embassy. Why can’t others?”

The government’s only concern is the foreign exchange earned by the estimated 1.2 million Sri Lankans working abroad, mainly in the Middle East. Last year they sent home \$1.5 billion in

remittances—the country’s main foreign exchange earner.

The WSWs spoke last week to returnees and relatives outside the FEB office. Most were from very poor rural families. Some could not even read or write. Many could not afford food or water and had been waiting long hours for a chance to speak by phone to their relatives in Lebanon.

Y.G. Kumudini had just returned from Lebanon. “I saw the war. The house where I was working was situated about a mile from the Beirut airport area,” she said. “When the attack started I saw flames and heard the explosion of bombs. Initially, I did not know what was going on. My employer had switched off the TV to prevent us watching the news. A friend of mine told me about the Israel attacks.

“From what I saw there is no Beirut any more. Almost all the buildings have been flattened by the bombing. Why couldn’t Israel give people in Lebanon a chance to leave and foreigners to return to their countries? I don’t know why Israel is attacking Lebanon but the masses are suffering. There are up to 90,000 Sri Lankans. I think they all want to come back.”

Kumudini asked for her pay to return to Sri Lanka but her employer refused. “I ran away and went to the Sri Lankan embassy without my five months salary.” She was angered by the response of Sri Lankan authorities, who provided the first batch of returnees from Lebanon just 5,000 rupees [\$US50] on arrival in Colombo. “That was a pittance. They gave me 10 rupees to go to Wattala, not even enough for a bus fare. I told them I was no beggar and refused to take the money.”

Several relatives of Vijitha Mallika, who was killed in Lebanon, were at the FEB office. Her mother explained that the family wants her daughter’s body

returned, but it is still in a Lebanese hospital. “My other two daughters are still in Lebanon. We want them back here,” she said. Vijatha’s sister Manori was trying to return to Sri Lanka with her body, but had not been able to do so. Vijatha went to Lebanon to try to earn enough money to build a new house for the family, who are impoverished labourers in a cinnamon plantation.

R.M. Kusumawathie from North Central Province was waiting with a relative outside the FEB office for news of her 19-year-old daughter. “I sent one of my daughters to Lebanon because as farmers we are very poor. Now I want her to return. Why should we sacrifice our lives in a war?” she said. Her relative added: “We oppose this war. Big countries want to capture small countries. This kind of war is destroying innocent lives.”

Kusumawathie explained that her family tried to make a living growing pumpkins, but made a loss. “Facing such conditions I allowed my daughter to work in Lebanon to provide some financial relief. Now we have lost all contact with her. We spent money and time to come to this office to try to make a telephone call. Still it is not sure whether we will be able to contact her or not,” she said anxiously.

Beeta Malini told the WSWS: “My daughter, Shamalie Ranaweera, went to Lebanon in February. After the war started, I made a telephone call but suddenly it cut out. I understood she wanted to tell me something. Today officials here have contacted the house but her employer wanted us to call back later. So we are waiting.

“My daughter has a small child, just three and a half years old. I don’t know what to do. Her husband is a labourer. I don’t know much about the war in Lebanon. But I can understand it is destroying lives. I told officials here I want my daughter to return.”

Mariya Fernando said she had heard the sounds of bombs in the background when she spoke to her daughter, Samantha Priyanganie. Her employer had refused to allow her to leave. “I told her to run away to the Sri Lankan embassy. The FEB announced that Sri Lankans can return from Lebanon even without a passport. Now she has run away but a week has passed and she has not contacted the embassy. Who is taking responsibility for her?” she exclaimed.

The mother of Anura Samarasinghe had also lost contact with her daughter after her employer refused to

allow her to leave. “We don’t want her salary or any compensation. I told officials we only want our daughter. About 2,000 people have returned to Sri Lanka after arriving at the embassy on their own. What has happened to others who are working far from Beirut? And others who are still trapped in their work places? The government has no plan to evacuate them.”



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