

Spain: Migrant workers spend years stranded outside “Fortress Europe”

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In 2005, a group of 72 Sikhs left India on the hazardous journey to Europe, hoping to find work. Four years later, many of them are still stranded on the border with Spain.

Before they left India, the migrant workers were forced to pay up to \$30,000 each to traffickers. After being dumped in Burkina Faso, they spent two years wandering through several African countries until they finally arrived at the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in Morocco. Their journey came to a halt. In front of them stood a 6-metre-high barbed wire fence financed by the European Union (EU), as part of its “Fortress Europe” strategy. During the construction of the fence around Ceuta in 2005, border guards and police shot dead at least 14 migrant workers and beat hundreds more as they made a last desperate attempt to scale it before the border was sealed.

Gurpreet Singh told the Spanish daily *El Pais* last month how, at the age of 24, he had been through “more suffering than many people experience in their whole lives.”

He left his village in the Punjab in 2004 after paying smugglers \$15,000 and arrived in Ceuta two years later, hidden under the dashboard of a car. During his journey, he said he was robbed, beaten, kidnapped and imprisoned and watched two friends die of hunger and thirst in the desert. “The traffickers threw them in garbage bags and dumped them in the sand,” Singh explained.

Until April 2007, they had stayed in an Immigrants Temporary Holding Centre, one of many so-called migrant holding centres dotting Europe. Although official documents state that people should not stay in

the centres for more than three months, many have stayed there for years, only to be deported to where they came from. Some of the centres are so overcrowded that low-quality tents have had to be put up, which let in the rain, leaving people living inside them flooded, cold and in bad health.

The workers took the decision to leave the centre in order to escape government deportation orders and after it became clear that officials from the Indian Embassy were helping the police enforce them. “We realised that every time someone from the Indian Embassy came to the shelter, there were repatriations,” explained Singh. “It happened in February 2007. A few days after the officials from our country left, the police took away 48 Indian nationals. It happened again a while later; that time they took 13. So when they showed up again, we decided to leave before they took us.”

Since then, 54 of the Sikh workers have spent more than a year in make-shift camps hidden among the trees in the Renegado mountains outside Ceuta, as a protest against the refusal of the Spanish government to allow them into the country and grant them a work permit.

The group lives in utter poverty and inhuman conditions, surviving in flimsy huts made out of branches, plastic and cardboard, and shares a small common cooking area nearby. Singh, who has become the group’s spokesman, stated that about 20 of those living in the mountains are in a bad physical condition due to the lack of food and the low temperatures.

The migrant workers eke out a living by directing drivers to parking spaces, helping people with their shopping at supermarkets and returning trolleys. The only help they get is from the small Indian community in Ceuta and some NGOs. In an attempt to avoid deportation, they have split up into seven groups, so

that if the police carry out a raid at least some of them might escape.

The workers claim that the length of time they have lived so far in Spanish territory should entitle them to residency and allow them to travel to mainland Spain. They have launched a campaign to collect signatures for a petition demanding the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) administration revoke the order for them to be expelled because they entered the country illegally. They are well on their way to their target of 5,000 signatures, helped by their compatriots who live in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. The group argues that 33 Bangladeshi immigrant workers, who collected a total of 3,000 signatures in 2007 in a similar campaign, won the approval of the authorities to remain in the country.

However, everything has changed since then, in terms of the economic crisis, unemployment and the growing hostility of the government to foreign workers.

The PSOE administration, which in 2005 legalised the status of 700,000 undocumented migrants, has refused to reverse its decision to expel them. "There is no solution other than repatriation," insists José Fernández Chacón, the central government representative in the enclave. He declared that the migrant smuggling route that brought the Indians to Ceuta was now closed and that the government will not make any concessions that could encourage more migrants to follow in their footsteps. "The Indian Embassy has recognised them as Indian nationals. They will be repatriated," he said.

Currently, Spain only grants nationality to 15 out of every 1,000 resident foreigners, one of the lowest percentages in the European Union where the average is 26. According to the statistics office, Eurostat, in 2006 some 735,000 people acquired nationality of an EU member state. Spain nationalised 62,375, as against Britain (154,000), France (148,000) and Germany (125,000).

Through the Ley de Extranjeria (Immigration Law), people are fined and punished if they are found to provide aid or shelter to foreign workers without papers or in any way help them remain in Spain. The time of internment before deportation has just been increased from 40 to 60 days. The splitting up of families and the treatment of minors is so bad that the government has

had to accept some mild reforms after criticism from immigration associations, Amnesty International and other NGOs.

The government is pushing its Plan de Incentivo al Retorno Voluntario (Incentive for Voluntary Return Plan) to persuade migrant workers from 20 non-EU member countries, who have become unemployed, to return to their countries. Under the initiative, they will be paid their entire unemployment benefit to which they are entitled in two payments, 40 percent just before they leave and the other 60 percent after they return to their country of origin. In exchange, they have to renounce their work and residence permits and undertake not to return to Spain for three years. The situation facing immigrants in their home country is so poor, however, that it is thought only 15 percent of migrant workers will take up the offer.



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