

India ships food after mass protests by starving Indian workers in Saudi Arabia

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The Indian government has sent 16,000 kilograms of food to Saudi Arabia, which was distributed in front of India's consulate in the port city of Jeddah, in an attempt to defuse mass protests by Indian migrant workers who had been laid off and left to starve.

More than 10,000 Indian migrant workers in that country are battling hunger after employers refused to pay their wages. They cannot leave Saudi Arabia because their employers often hold their passports in order to control them; nor can they afford a return trip home.

One Saudi construction company, Saudi Oger, has refused to pay its workers' wages for seven months. It employs a total of 50,000 employees, including 4,000 Indian migrant workers. Last week, hundreds of Saudi Oger's employees, who said they had not been paid in seven months, led protests in Jeddah demanding their back wages. The protest caused traffic disruptions in northern Jeddah and shut down a gas station.

The Saudi government subsequently sent police to disperse the protest. It then stationed police outside the workers' camps to keep them from protesting while they starve.

After interviewing workers at one of the camps, CNN Money reported: "Trash collection has stopped, and there's no electricity. The workers get water from the mosque across the street. Police are stationed outside after protests erupted in recent weeks."

These events expose the ruthless class relations that exist in Saudi Arabia, the NATO powers' most reliable ally in the Middle East and the leading source of funding for the various US-backed Islamist insurgencies in Libya, Syria and Iraq. The parasitic multi-billionaires of the Saudi royal family deprive inhabitants of Saudi Arabia—in particular, millions of super-exploited foreign migrant workers—of basic social and democratic rights.

There are roughly 3 million Indian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, which depends on migrant workers to fill

jobs in its construction, services and manufacturing. In blue collar jobs like construction, many face severe hardship, working outdoors in extreme temperatures, and abuse by their employers. They work for a pittance, mainly in construction, transport and other low-paying sectors, and face miserable living conditions: meager meals and a lack of running water and functioning toilets in their camps.

Human Rights Watch has criticised Saudi Arabia for rampant employer abuses of migrant workers, including forcing them to work "against their will or on exploitative terms." A visa system that ties workers' residency to employment "grants employers excessive power over workers and facilitates abuse," the group said.

The Indian state has never tried to defend the Indian migrant workers in the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms. According to the latest figures of December 2015, around 7,500 Indians have filed complaints, including exploitation and torture, against their employers in Persian Gulf countries.

The highest number of complaints was from Kuwait (3,236), followed by Saudi Arabia (2,472) and Bahrain (806). Indian missions in Oman, Qatar and UAE received 413, 378, and 126 complaints respectively. At the same time, about 5,900 Indian workers lost their lives in the Gulf countries last year, with most deaths reported from Saudi Arabia (2,691) and the United Arab Emirates (1,540).

The abuse and exploitation of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia has intensified enormously amid the financial crisis triggered by the ongoing global collapse in oil prices.

The Saudi monarchy has reacted by slashing government spending. With 70 percent of its revenue dependent on oil, it has cut public spending for 2016 by 25 percent, cutting subsidies on fuel, power and water, with gas prices set to increase by 80 percent. Mass layoffs

continue to mount in oil companies and state-owned firms across the region, and since most other jobs are also connected to the petroleum industry, few workers are secure.

Local construction firms, which mostly rely on Indian migrant workers, are under pressure as a result. One of the largest companies, construction giant Saudi Bin Laden Group (SBG), which has built most of the country's public buildings, was unable to pay its work force.

According to a survey by GulfTalent, an online recruitment agency, 14 percent of private companies plan to cut jobs in Saudi Arabia in 2016. In Oman, UAE and Qatar, the figure is 10 percent, 9 percent and 8 percent, respectively.

The recent announcement that Saudi Arabia will implement the second phase of the Nitaqat law, which allows the government to reserve jobs for native Saudis, will create more difficulties for Indian job seekers. Migrants are already worried that Gulf countries could levy tax on their personal income.

Nonetheless, head hunters in India looking for cheap labour are confident that acute poverty and social desperation that characterise Indian capitalism will continue to drive workers to seek work in the Persian Gulf sheikdoms. Wakeel Ansari, the president of Delhi's association of recruiting agents, says Indian workers' complaints have barely impacted their businesses, though they are suffering from the economic slowdown due to the crash in oil prices.

"The number of complaints is not even 1 per cent of the 7.3 million Indians residing in the Gulf," Ansari said, dismissing the mass abuse of migrants in the Persian Gulf countries. "There may be some genuine cases of harassment or exploitation, but this can happen in any country," he said.

The recruiting agents added that Gulf employers prefer Bangladeshi and Nepalese workers, as their wage levels are even lower than those of Indian workers.



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