

COVID-19 lockdown leaves Gulf states' migrant workers penniless in unsanitary conditions

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Millions of migrant workers in Gulf countries have been laid off without income in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their plight is terrible. Unable to return home because of travel restrictions or their countries' refusal to accept them, they have been left to fester in lockdown, confined to overcrowded, unsanitary dormitories without access to either health care or help.

The impact on their health and finances will ricochet across the world due to the vast numbers and diversity of migrants in the Persian Gulf.

While the obscenely rich princes and emirs of the Arabian Peninsula can shelter in their palaces to reduce the risk of infection and access the health care so necessary for survival, the conditions of life for those workers who cater to their every whim are the complete opposite. Effectively imprisoned, they are not only more likely to get infected; they are unable to get treatment or manage the terrible consequences of the expanding economic catastrophe.

This indisputable fact of class life finds its supreme expression in the venal House of Saud and other petromonarchies, which exploit the labour power of a massive army of migrant workers, largely from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Africa.

Migrant workers make up 9 million of Saudi Arabia's 33 million population; 7.8 million of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) 9.2 million; 2.34 million of Qatar's 2.6 million; 500,000 of Bahrain's 1.6 million; 1.8 million of Oman's four million; and 3.15 million of Kuwait's 4.5 million. This constitutes 24 million people, or nearly half of the six countries' 54 million population and two thirds of their workforce.

Migrant workers in the Gulf account for 12 percent of the nearly 200 million migrant workers globally, who travel across national borders and whose conditions are not much better. Another 760 million move within their own countries in search of work: more than 400 million in China and 40

million in India, although this is likely a gross underestimate.

In the Gulf, migrant workers labour in construction, sanitation, transportation, hospitality and domestic service for a pittance, under the notorious *kefala* system that binds them to their employer and prevents them changing jobs in a modern form of indentured servitude. Working long hours in horrendous conditions in the scorching heat, they are forced to live for years alone in labour camps that are little short of prisons, in order to send home money to their families who would otherwise starve.

The crowded conditions in which they live and work provide a fertile breeding ground for the coronavirus. Migrant workers are not only victims but potential carriers too, taking the epidemic back to their families, often in remote villages unable to deal with a health crisis. This means that their villages or home countries have in some cases greeted potentially infected homecomers with suspicion.

Without the most basic rights, migrant workers are typically the first to be hit by an economic downturn. As the first cases of the coronavirus hit the region in March, governments shuttered their economies, imposed self-distancing restrictions and banned international travel, although some sectors, such as construction and oil and gas, have continued to work, exposing migrant workers to the virus.

While the number of COVID-19 cases is still small compared to the US and Europe—some 26,653 confirmed cases and 167 deaths as of April 20—these are likely to be an underestimate given the lack of testing. Already it appears that the migrants have borne the brunt of the virus, with Saudi Arabia reporting on April 5 that foreigners made up half of its then 4,000-plus COVID-19 cases. Qatar, amid a construction boom as it prepares to host the 2022 World Cup, found hundreds of cases among migrants.

Paid not much more than \$200 per month, many workers

have amassed substantial debts before they had even begun working, in order to pay the agents and middlemen who found them work in the Gulf and organised their travel. Their loss of income affects not only themselves but also their families who receive billions of dollars in remittances every year.

This explains why their own governments have given the nod to the Gulf states' atrocious treatment of migrant workers: their remittances provide a crucial safety net for the impoverished masses, thereby deflecting popular anger. These conditions also form the standard that corporations and governments around the world are now seeking to emulate.

Oman, Qatar and the UAE are compounding the migrants' plight by blocking voice and video calls over apps such as WhatsApp, Facetime and Skype in order to protect the commercial interests of their own telecom companies. A group of 29 rights groups, protesting against the ban on Internet calls during the pandemic, issued a statement saying, "This has caused serious problems for the people living in those countries, especially the majority of migrant workers and foreign national residents who need to connect and communicate with their families and communities overseas."

While the Gulf countries have announced aid packages, these are for their own citizens, not foreign labourers. Running out of food and money, with nowhere to turn in countries that treat them as slave labour, these workers face starvation.

A survey carried out by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC) raised its "deep concern" over the safety of migrant workers in the Gulf. It revealed that most of the construction companies taking part in the survey (and only half replied) in the UAE and Qatar were not doing enough to protect their workers. It found that work on construction sites in Qatar was continuing during the pandemic despite the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers at the World Cup sites, with workers having to bring their own masks. Social distancing at work and in living quarters, which were often unsanitary, was impossible, yet none of the companies had any plans to improve their accommodation or provide PPE.

Most workers were forced to work even if they were unwell, as only four companies guaranteed job security for those unable to work due to ill health, and only three said that workers forced to self-isolate would be paid in full.

So bad are the conditions in the UAE that the Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre in Dubai has petitioned the Indian High Court, calling on the government to repatriate its citizens. Haris Beeran, a lawyer representing the petitioners, told the UAE-based *The National*, "We know of 10,000

people just from Kerala who want to come back home." He added, "Many workers no longer have jobs [and] some people are on visit visas that have expired. They don't have any means to live in the UAE and would rather return to their family at this time."

Pinarayi Vijayan, chief minister of the Indian state of Kerala, has called on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to organise the repatriation of Indian workers in the Gulf. Some 3 million Indians work in the Gulf, nearly a million from Kerala. Modi has refused to do so before India's own nationwide lockdown ends.

There are also thousands of migrant workers languishing in the Gulf states' overcrowded prisons and detention centres, further exacerbating the likelihood of the virus spreading uncontrollably. According to Human Rights Watch, many migrant workers, particularly those who have fled ruthless employers or are undocumented because their employers have withheld their papers, spend long periods in detention centres prior to deportation.

The UAE has warned countries refusing to repatriate their workers that it may take action against them. Kuwait has sought to deport workers it claims are violating quarantine instructions and has called on Egypt and India to repatriate citizens working there "illegally."

Saudi Arabia has deported nearly 3,000 Ethiopian migrants to Addis Ababa, as part of a broader plan seen by Reuters to deport 200,000 Ethiopians, with other Gulf States expected to follow suit. Catherine Sozi, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Ethiopia, told Reuters, "Large-scale migratory movements which are not planned make the transmission of the virus much more likely to continue. We are therefore calling for the temporary suspension of large-scale deportations."

Without controlling the spread of the virus in humane conditions and treating its victims—citizens or migrants—the human toll will grow exponentially as the disease spreads across the world.



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