

Gulf States force India and other South Asian states to repatriate impoverished migrant workers

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Bowing to pressure from the sheikhs and oligarchs who rule the Arabian Peninsula's Gulf States, India and other South Asian countries are being forced to repatriate millions of impoverished migrant workers whose labour is no longer needed.

All six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have moved to dramatically slash expenditures and “overhead” after the COVID-19 pandemic triggered global economic distress, including a Saudi-initiated oil-price war. The consequent collapse in oil prices has left gaping holes in their state budgets, even as tourism and other sources of revenue dry up.

The result has been the mass layoff of millions of migrant workers. Those fortunate enough not to have lost their jobs have often been forced to accept huge wage cuts. A migrant worker in Saudi Arabia working as a chef for one of the country's many princes told the WSWs that his wage was cut in half after the COVID-19 crisis erupted.

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic there were 23 million or more migrant workers in the Gulf States, from South Asia, the Philippines, Egypt, Palestine, elsewhere in the Middle East, and East Africa. Constituting more than half of the Gulf States' total workforce, the migrant workers have long filled construction and numerous other menial and low-paid jobs. Millions of women serve as domestics and health care workers.

The migrant workers are ensnared in the *kafala system*, which ties a worker's employment contract to their right to be in the country. This has created a super-exploited workforce comprised of people who lack any citizenship rights in countries ruled by absolute monarchs, and who are under constant threaten of being ordered to go home should they be fired or laid off or when their contract expires.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic, the imposition of international travel bans and state-lockdowns, and the

sudden loss of their employment mean that the newly jobless migrant workers facing expulsion have lacked the means or right to return home.

As the Gulf States oligarchs have refused to provide the “disposable” migrant workers with financial support, they have become increasingly desperate. This has made the ruling elite, ever fearful of social opposition, all the more determined to expel them. Scapegoating the migrant workers also serves as a mean of deflecting mounting discontent among the officially-recognized “native” population of the Gulf States.

The mass layoffs of migrant workers destroyed their ability to pay rent or basic living expenses, leading many to become homeless. Pradeep Kumar and his diabetic and pregnant wife, Premaltha, are examples of such workers. Mr. Kumar, who lost his job as a hotel worker in February, has been unable to support his family and was forced to spend a few nights sleeping in a basement car park. He told the BBC, “I have no money to pay for my wife's delivery, nor do I have the funds to buy a flight ticket...The doctors say that if she travels after she enters her 33rd week of pregnancy then that will be a huge risk for the baby and her health. I just want to save my child.”

The Gulf States have responded to the rise in homelessness by arresting workers and sending them to cramped jails and detention centers. Amnesty International exposed that Qatar was lying to migrant workers, telling them they would get tested for COVID-19, so it could round them up and throw them in jail. One of the workers, a Nepalese man, said, “The jail was full of people. We were given one piece of bread each day, which was not enough. All the people were fed in a group, with food lying on plastic on the floor. Some were not able to snatch the food because of the crowd.”

Facing immense abuse, workers began to resist. On May 3, Egyptian workers, using furniture as weapons, led a riot in a Kuwait detention center.

By then, Gulf State governments, well aware of the rising

social tensions but unwilling to meet the migrant workers' basic needs of food, proper housing and health care, had been pressuring countries in South Asia to take back their citizens.

Initially India balked at the repatriation demands, citing its own anti-COVID-19 lockdown and concerns about the mounting number of coronavirus cases among the migrant workers.

However, with the UAE publicly and other states no doubt privately threatening long-term damage to their bilateral relations, India relented and agreed to speedily organize the repatriation of hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of its citizens.

India is massively dependent on oil imports from the Gulf, and that dependence has increased over the past year-and-a-half because New Delhi has acquiesced to Washington's demand it abide by the US' illegal, punitive sanctions against Iran. India's far-right BJP government is also eagerly courting investment from the Gulf States and views them as a potential source of lucrative contracts for India's burgeoning arms-manufacturing sector.

On May 4, India announced a mass repatriation plan, and other South Asian states, similarly eager to curry the favour of the Gulf States' rulers, are now also scrambling to organize the migrant workers' transit home and to establish testing and quarantine centers to receive them.

India has already used its navy and a fleet of planes to bring back over 1 million Indian workers from around the world and over the next two to three weeks plans to evacuate 200,000 more. Nepali officials said they expected to bring back 400,000 workers, of which 100,000 would be shipped back immediately after the expiration of the country's lockdown on June 2. According to the Pakistani embassy, more than 60,000 Pakistani nationals have registered for repatriation.

The repatriation of the migrant workers constitutes a huge crisis for the states of South Asia.

The majority, and more likely the vast majority, of the 160,000 COVID-19 infections in the Gulf States have been among migrant workers. The workers live in cramped and unhygienic conditions in "normal times." Now many have lost their housing, either because it was tied to their employment or they could no longer pay rent, and the Gulf States' governments have responded by herding the homeless into even more cramped prisons and detention centers.

The mass repatriation plans threaten to produce a wave of new infections and deaths in their home countries, where COVID-19 cases are already surging and health care systems are dilapidated and in rural areas largely non-existent.

Last week Pakistan complained to the UAE that half of those returning from that country had tested positive for COVID-19. Pakistan's Special Adviser to the Prime Minister on National Security, Moeed Yusf, told reporters, "We've raised this diplomatically," adding that "God willing" the problem "is being solved."

The loss of tens of billion in dollars in remittances from the migrant workers in the Gulf also constitutes a serious blow to the economies of South Asia's states, especially smaller states such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, and an even bigger blow to the millions of family members who have depended on the sums they regularly sent home.

The migrant laborers, many of them landless peasants, took on predatory loans and worked dangerous jobs in order to get the opportunity to support and create a better life for their families back home.

Now they face, to say the least, a very uncertain future. They are being repatriated under conditions where the countries they left are being ravaged by the global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic. In India more than 100 million day-labourers, many of them internal migrant workers, have lost their jobs and income since mid-March.

For decades, migrant workers have performed the backbreaking labour needed to keep the Gulf State oligarchs living in luxury akin to that of the Pharaohs, and to pursue their "vision" of transforming their desert states into global financial, commercial and tourist hubs with city "oases" boasting ultra-modern skyscrapers and conveniences. According to a *Guardian* investigation, hundreds of construction workers die each year in Qatar from heat exhaustion.

The oligarchs of the Gulf State and their hangers-on have responded to the plight of migrant workers with venomous rhetoric and demonization, blaming them for the growth of COVID-19 infections. Kuwaiti actress Hayat al-Fahad told a broadcaster, "Aren't people supposed to leave during crises? I swear by God, put them in the desert. I am not against humane treatment, but we have gotten to a point where we're fed up already." These sentiments were repeated by Kuwaiti MP Safaa Al-Hashem, who called for the deportation of migrants to "purify" the country.



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