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Amnesty and undocumented Indian workers in Kuwait during COVID-19

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Abstract

The Kuwaiti government offers amnesty to undocumented workers in order for them to return to their home countries, but provides insufficient facilities for those waiting to return. The slowness of response from the Indian government prolongs the migrants' plight.

Keywords

undocumented migrant workers, shelter, India, Kuwait, Emergency Certificate

Theme

Shock (im)mobility

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On 14 June 2020, Kumar (whose name was changed in this entry), a 38-year-old man working as a taxi driver, received a call from the Indian Embassy in Kuwait. The following is his recollection of the telephone conversation:

> 'First they asked my name, then where I was working and if I was willing to go back home. They then asked about the nature of my problem. After gathering the remaining details, they asked me whether I had money to purchase the flight tickets. They told me, to my surprise, that only if I said 'yes' would they proceed with the call, and if 'no' then they would immediately disconnect the call. Furthermore, if I said 'yes' then they mentioned that I would have to undergo COVID-19 testing followed by 14-day quarantine upon arrival. Only if I agreed to these conditions would they inform us on how to book the tickets and then they would note my name. Based on this, we had to decide on whether [to] go home or not.'

This narration is telling of the plight of poor, stranded Indian blue-collar workers willing to return from the Gulf countries. For example, the ticket for the special flight from Kuwait to Chennai costs 78 Kuwaiti dinars (approximately Rs 19,100, or USD 263). After their arrival, migrants spend quarantine in facilities that are free of cost. Paid facilities, which are substantially more comfortable, charge around Rs 1,500 per person per day.

Undocumented Indian workers and amnesty in Kuwait

It is unclear how many Indians have contracted COVID-19 in Kuwait, but media reports have stated that Kuwait is the country where most Indians were infected after Singapore.[3] At the same time, thousands of Indians in Kuwait lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Most undocumented migrants work in the construction sector, hotels, sheep herding, gardening, and other low-end jobs. Generally, low-skilled migrant workers from India enter Gulf countries legally. However, some become undocumented migrants at a later stage, after running away from abusive employers who confiscate their passport. Workers can also lose their legal status due to other reasons, such as job loss or visa overstay.

In Kuwait, India has had to deal not only with legally stranded Indians, but, also, with thousands of undocumented Indian workers who registered for an amnesty to leave the country without incurring any penalty, a programme that was announced by the Kuwaiti government as the pandemic started spreading in the country in April 2020. After registering for amnesty, these migrants were housed in shelter homes provided by the Kuwaiti government, waiting to return. Since the first week of April, expatriates of other countries such as Pakistan and the Philippines have been repatriated from Kuwait. But the Indian expatriates who had applied for amnesty have been languishing in the shelter homes as the Indian government is yet to present concrete evacuation plans.

[3] Haidar, Suhasini, and Kallol Battarsharjee. 2020. Most COVID-19 positive Indians abroad are in the Gulf. *The Hindu.* 16 April 2020. Available online at: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-3336-indians-infected-by-coronavirus-in-53-countries-say-govt-sources/article31357569.ece. Last accessed 29 November 2020;
Laskar, Rezaul H. 2020. Singapore, Kuwait record highest number of Indians infected with Covid-19. *The Hindustan Times*. 27 April 2020. Available online at: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/singapore-kuwait-record-highest-number-of-indian-covid-19-cases/story-nNW338HhJdwSu93GC2aCOM.html. Last accessed 29 November 2020.

Furthermore, undocumented migrants have to wait for Emergency Certificates (EC)[4] issued by the Indian Embassy in Kuwait. An EC is valid for a single journey to India within a period of six months, and it does not exempt a holder from immigration or visa regulations. The holder should keep the EC carefully, and submit it along with the application for a duplicate passport upon their arrival in India.

The Indian Embassy in Kuwait has authorized Indian social workers to assist undocumented migrants in applying and getting an EC from the Embassy. But it is also reported that some social workers are exploiting women by demanding money to process their EC application. There has also been a delay in issuing the EC on the part of the embassy for the Indians seeking amnesty. And staying without any documents puts them at even greater risk.

Unrest and fear among Indians in shelters awaiting amnesty

Most of the undocumented migrants who applied for amnesty and were staying in the Kuwaiti government's shelters have been enduring inadequate living conditions, including those who were kept in a school shelter for 25 days. A worker in Kuwait told us that 'for two weeks, I have stayed in a car shed and there are around 150 Indians (mostly from Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal) staying in the nearby car parking area. With the help of a voluntary organisation, they eat only one meal a day.' This shows that a significant number of Indians are stuck in the streets of Kuwait, and they are just surviving with little hope of returning home. Some of them have already received their ECs, but they have no accommodation or access to basic amenities. Moreover, these low-skilled migrants are illiterate, and have no bargaining power with their employers.

In shelters provided by the Kuwaiti government, as well as in other Gulf countries,[5] the beds are on the floor and the bed spaces are very close, which greatly increases chances of infection. Videos released by women inside the shelters show that aged and ailing women as well as children are kept in the crowded shelters. These women are facing innumerable problems such as unavailability of sanitary napkins, insufficient toilet facilities, etc. Their case raises a strong question of why the Indian government is not coming forward to help them for safe repatriation.

In Kuwait, unrest is slowly mounting among the Indian workers in shelters as they started to use social media to narrate their plight and desperations to return to India. Many of them do not have money to recharge their mobile phones and communicate with their families, or meet basic needs. The Kuwaiti government has offered free tickets for undocumented workers with its own civil

[4] According to the Indian authorities, an Emergency Certificate is 'issued to an Indian national for his/her return back to India if there is no valid travel document with the person or he/she is an illegal resident [undocumented migrant] … No passport will ordinarily be issued in such cases. The applicant will be issued an Emergency Certificate after verification of his/her personal particulars and after his/her claim to be an Indian citizen is fully established through documents or by concerned Indian authorities.' For undocumented migrants, the Kuwaiti government arranged flights at no cost. But documented workers who have a passport can resort to Vande Bharat Mission flights. Source: Consulate General of India in Dubai. Emergency Certificate. See online at: https://www.cgidubai.gov.in/page/emergency-certificates/#:~:text=Consular%20%E2%80%BA%20EMERGENCY%20CERTIFICATES-,Emergency%20Certificates,be%20issued%20in%20such%20cases. Last accessed 29 November 2020.

[5] George, Varghese K. 2020. Indian labourers abroad are in dire need of help, say experts. *The Hindu*. 11 April 2020. Available online at: thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-indian-labourers-in-gcc-countries-are-in-dire-need-of-help-say-migration-experts-irudaya-rajan-and-ginu-zacharaia-oommen/article31318501.ece. Last accessed 29 November 2020.

airlines; however, the Indian government is yet to respond to this offer in the time of writing.[6,7] In the midst of a pandemic, stranded Indians in Kuwait are facing unemployment and unsanitary living conditions, but the efforts of the Indian government to protect them and bring them home have been so far insufficient.

[6] The Wire. 2020. *Kuwait reiterates offer to transport undocumented Indian workers for free*. 2 May 2020. Available online at: https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-kuwait-undocumented-workers-amnesty-transport. Last accessed 29 November 2020.

[7] Bhattacherjee, Kallol. 2020. Kuwait offers to airlift stranded Indians. *The Hindu*. 1 May 2020. Available online at: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kuwait-offers-to-airlift-stranded-indians/article31484743.ece. Last accessed 29 November 2020.