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## Covid-19 And Migrant Workers: The great wage robbery



Asian workers at a construction site in the Gulf emirate of Dubai. Dubai is one of the locations for some of Bangladesh's 10 million migrant workers who are mostly employed in the Middle East. Photo: Afp/Karim Sahib

"Gulf countries are highly dependent on migrant workers in almost every major sector... and yet they have utterly failed to protect migrant workers, and treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve"—these words were spoken by a representative of Amnesty International while highlighting the plight of migrant workers during Covid-19 times.

In a letter to the UN Secretary General, Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants expressed concern that during the pandemic, some destination countries are exerting pressure on the origin countries to take back the latter's nationals, and appealed to him to exert his influence on those governments "to take the responsibility of this group of vulnerable workers at this time of crisis".

Despite migrant workers' colossal contribution in building the edifices of and shoring up the economies of the Gulf and other Arab countries for decades, coronavirus has betrayed the ill treatment and injustices that have been structurally embedded in this labour market. If anything, thanks to the pandemic, the reality that has thus far remained behind the scenes has been laid bare. Neither the opulent host countries nor most of the countries of origin (in their rush to secure the flow of remittances), have ever cared to duly acknowledge the problems that over time became well entrenched, let alone put in place mechanisms to address them.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, narratives (largely on social media) of migrants located in various destination countries convincingly conveyed the dire quandary they are in. Many are without adequate food for days or even weeks, crammed in unhygienic and unsanitary quarters, some even without proper shelters, making a mockery of the WHO call for social distancing. A large segment remains idle as construction sites and other production facilities, restaurants and markets remain shuttered. Faced with a situation of possible deportation, many were forced to accept withholding or reduction of wages without any guarantee of whether they would be reimbursed at all, a measure that is in breach of labour standards. Bereft of any earnings and with fast depleting savings (if they had them at all), they face virtual starvation and are trapped in great uncertainty. Those lucky to retain jobs are unable to send money to their loved ones at home as remittance transfer facilities in destination countries remain closed. The diplomatic missions of their respective countries command meagre resources—far less than the amount the distressed migrants need.

In this grave uncertainty, what has come as a bolt from the blue is the arbitrary termination of contracts by employers. Like aftershocks during an earthquake, a large number of migrant workers were speedily notified that their services are no longer required. It was done at a time when their contracts remained valid. This was not the end of their affliction. To their bewilderment, not only did the workers not receive a penny as



compensation for arbitrary termination, but they faced the loss of all outstanding dues as well—wages, benefits and the like.

Taking advantage of their governments' plans to send workers back to their countries of origin, the employers who could still manage to run their enterprises are terminating the contracts of migrant workers. Covid-19 for them is a God-sent opportunity to rob the workers of the huge sums of money that they are owed. A huge number of cases were reported where months of due wages and benefits have been withheld.

Employers in destination countries know quite well the iron grip they command over the market. They are also aware that if they require the services of migrant workers in future, their own governments would have no issues in granting them work permits. Yet again, the recruiting agencies at both ends would work in unison to get big cuts from the exorbitant costs of the new visas that they would sell to aspirant migrants as manna from heaven, and the authorities in the countries of origin would be too keen to see one more worker go abroad, with the anticipation of an additional amount, however small, in the flow of much coveted remittances, deemed as an important indicator of national development.

The relatively well off migrants also appear to be sinking into hardship. Migrant workers who over the years acquired specialised skills and graduated to become independent contractors, have also been adversely affected. With the stagnation in economic activities, they are worried about recouping the amounts spent for work that has already been completed.

The conditions of long term enterprising labour migrants who managed to mature through the ranks and subsequently become co-owners of enterprises, such as tailoring shops, motor garages and convenience stores, are no better. They are worried that the hardline policies (of sending back migrants to their countries of origin) may act as an inducement to their Arab partners (in whose names the enterprises are registered) to dump them. Needless to say, the legal regime of the Gulf and other Arab states do not provide any protection to foreigners who make such investments. Despite prohibitions in the law, this practice is largely abetted by the authorities, to the huge benefit of the non-investing local partners. Covid-19 may have come as a boon to these rent-seekers, allowing them to strip the entrepreneurial migrants of their *de facto* ownership.

Large scale return, deportation or repatriation of migrant workers during the times of Covid-19 is a reality. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, more than 200,000 have been sent back to their countries of origin in Asia. In all likelihood, the figure will "rise exponentially" when the flights resume over the next few months. Migrant Forum in Asia



(MFA) predicts countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines will experience eventual return of a massive number of their migrant workers—"millions will be repatriated to situations of debt bondage as they will be forced to pay off recruitment fees and costs, despite returning empty handed".

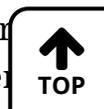
Under duress from destination countries, the countries of origin reluctantly became party to repatriation (in effect deportation) procedures conducted hastily, without any redress mechanism. Such procedures have been put in place when courts and other dispute settlement mechanisms in the countries of destination remain closed.

A joint statement issued on June 1 by five leading INGOs and trade unions observed that "Without ensuring companies and employers are doing their due diligence to protect and fulfil the human rights and labour rights of repatriated migrant workers, states ... became complicit in overseeing procedures where millions of workers will be returning without their earned wages ...nor seeing justice". Those workers were not provided with any document (contract, pay slip, attendance roll etc) by their employers, through which in future they can lodge legitimate claims of compensation for the harm they have been subjected to, if ever a justice mechanism is put in place. While the workers endure unparalleled hardships without any possibility of redress, unplanned facilitation of "repatriation" frees employers from any accountability.

The psychological toll of deportations on the pauperised and debt ridden migrant workers can never be accounted for. As yet, no exercise has been initiated to assess the measurable potential loss of remittances, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, through this wage thuggery by the countries of destination. The much celebrated Global Compact for Migration, New York Declaration, 2016 and regional (Colombo Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogue) and international processes (Global Forum on Migration and Development) have thus far failed to generate even a dim ray of hope for the millions of aggrieved migrants.

Today is the International Day of Family Remittances. It is observed to celebrate migrants' contributions to millions of households, and also to communities, countries and entire regions. Covid-19 has disrupted the flow of resources, eroding the resilience of migrant households. On March 19, 2020, the UN Secretary-General has called for global solidarity in responding to the coronavirus crisis, stating "remittances are lifelines in the developing world—especially now".

Unfortunately, the pandemic has proven the brittleness of the cherished concepts of "global solidarity and cooperation" on migration. If the call for Build Back Better is ever to succeed and if the attainment of the SDGs still remains a target from the precipice where it stands now, if the globalisation process is ever to matter to the marginalised of the



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world, then it is incumbent on all states and international actors to ensure accountability of the wage robbers. Otherwise, in all likelihood, the painstakingly built migration-development nexus will suffer a brutal jolt.

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**Ahmed El Salam**

You can't want one thing for one, and one thing for the others. This problem is in Bangladesh too Its called money and power, I have seen with my own eyes how working people men and women are treated by their bosses.

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