



No pay for 5 months, passports withheld: Indians stranded in Kuwait plead for help

The 88 construction workers, including 37 Indians, are demanding their wages and flight tickets to return to their respective countries.



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Eighty-eight migrant workers, including 37 Indian nationals, employed by Al-Raqeeb Buildings General Contracting Company, a labour supply firm in Kuwait, have not been paid since March this year. Their employer cut off their water supply in April, stopped their ration and threatened to “kick them around like a football”. The company is even refusing to give back these workers their passports.

As the coronavirus pandemic raged across the country, the men slept hungry, with twelve crammed in one room. “It’s hard to explain the insult and mental toll inflicted on us,” said Sathish Ayyavu, a 31-year-old construction worker from Tamil Nadu, who is owed 600 Kuwaiti Dinar (about Rs 1,47,500) by his employer. Most of the Indian migrant workers are from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Telangana. The other migrants are from Nepal and Bangladesh.

Al-Raqeeb Buildings General Contracting Company provides labourers to various government and private construction sites in the Gulf state, mostly for projects in the oil and gas sector. Last year, Al-Raqeeb, due to its poor human rights record, was blacklisted by the Indian Embassy in Kuwait for workers 'to avoid'.

Between March a
and got driven to

up before dawn
walls for 12

hours. When the workers enquired about their wages, the company kept putting it off.

Pramod Gopalan, a labourer from Palakkad, Kerala, said, “They kept saying, ‘go to work, go to work, we will pay you’. Every time, it was the same story. We asked for a specific date. But the company never told us when we would be paid.”

In April, the company cut the water supply to their dormitories. “We then requested a tanker delivery man, who is from Kerala, to supply us with water one time a day. Since then, we have been dependent on this tanker supply. But it is not sufficient for all of us,” said Pramod.

Over two out of every three people in Kuwait are foreigners. Plagued by falling oil revenue and an economic slowdown due to the pandemic, Kuwait’s economy - like everywhere - has slumped. Kuwait is now on the cusp of approving legislation that would drastically reduce the number of foreigners in the country. If approved, the law could force some 800,000 Indians in Kuwait - who comprise about 1.45 million people - to go home.

The anti-migrant rhetoric has increased during the pandemic, with members of parliament and a Kuwaiti female actor calling for workers to be deported. In March, actor Hayat-Al-Fahad accused migrants of depriving the locals of hospital beds during the pandemic, and wanted workers thrown out “in the desert”.

In early June, after three months of wage arrears and no stipend to buy provisions, the 88 men stopped working in protest. “This is when the threats started,” said Sathish.

“A labour manager at Al-Raqeeb said what can we achieve here in Kuwait. He said they will kick us around like a football. ‘What will you do?’ he asked us,” said Sathish.

Under the kafala system, a labour sponsorship system in the Gulf, with notable variations in each of the states, a worker must have a sponsoring employer and a specific job - neither of which can be changed easily.

Angry and frustrated, in mid-June, the men approached the Public Authority of Manpower, Kuwait’s labour complaints department. “We didn’t completely understand what was going on, because everything was in Arabic. At the ministry, labour officers called and spoke in person to the company representatives. But the company denied that we were owed any wages at all,” Sathish said.

Not convinced that their complaint would be resolved, the 88 men sat outside the department offices, on a broad pavement in the sun, asking for their wages and flight tickets back home.

Meanwhile, the workers learnt that Al-Raqeeb company cut the electricity supply to their dormitories. Yet, they continued to raise their demand for their wages, until midnight.

At 2 am the next morning, they were picked up by police and were taken to the station. In the morning, when the workers explained that the company had cut off their electricity, the cops had it restored.

Since then, the employer has not contacted the workers.

“The company has not taken any measures to protect us from COVID-19; not even masks. We are now receiving food and other ration from social workers,” said Pramod.

On July 15, nearly a month later, the men submitted a letter to the Jleeb police station in Kuwait, about the payment of their dues and air tickets to return. On July 29, the Indian Embassy wrote to Al-Raqeeb, urging the company to resolve the matter on “genuine humanitarian grounds”, and to consider “the impact of COVID-19”.

It is not clear if the company has responded to the Indian Embassy yet. On the ground, however, the workers have not heard from their employer. Their passports continue to be withheld, and their salaries have been pending for the last five months.

This isn’t the life Sathish had planned. He had studied catering, worked nine years in the hotel sector, and wanted a better life for him and his family when he migrated to Kuwait in 2016.