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Hundreds of Indian workers demand unpaid wages from Saudi construction firm

19 OCT 2020 / 20:55 H.

By Anuradha Nagaraj

CHENNAI, India, Oct 19 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Hundreds of Indian migrant workers who were laid off by a construction company in Saudi Arabia due to the coronavirus pandemic have filed a rare complaint to the Indian government over unpaid earnings, lawyers and campaigners said.

More than 280 labourers - who were fired by the Nasser S Al Hajri Corporation before being flown home on chartered flights in July - are part of what is believed to be the biggest collective case of its kind, said their lawyer Subhash Chand.

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Chand said all of the workers had been at the firm for at least five years - some over a decade - and were entitled to a "substantial amount" in outstanding end-of-contract benefits.

"Most of (the workers) confirmed that they had been asked to sign blank papers or documents that they didn't understand ... (in order to get) their passports and tickets," said Chand, who is part of Lawyers Beyond Borders, a network of legal experts.

"Many didn't want to return without their money but had no choice," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

The Indian embassy in Riyadh said the workers' complaint had been taken up with the company and Saudi officials this month, and that it was awaiting a response on the matter.

The Saudi human resources ministry could not be reached for comment but last month said workers could log violations through its online dispute settlement platform or go to a labour court.

The Nasser S Al Hajri Corporation - which describes itself on its website as the largest industrial contractor in the Middle East - did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

HELPLINE IN DEMAND

Hundreds of thousands of Indian migrant workers are estimated to have returned home from Gulf nations this year due to COVID-19, and activists, lawyers and unions said they were dealing with fresh complaints about pay issues on a daily basis.

The number of wage theft cases reported from Gulf countries rose more than three-fold between April and July compared with the same period last year, says the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, which advocates for human rights in business.

"We started a helpline for Gulf migrants in the middle of the pandemic and were flooded with calls of wage theft," said Rafeek Ravuther, founder of The Centre for Indian Migrant Studies, a Kerala-based charity that works for migrant rights.

"Among them there were hundreds calling in about (the Nasser S Al Hajri Corporation) and a few others," he added. "We consolidated the complaints and encouraged them to fight this collectively since it is difficult to pursue alone for many."

One of the workers in the case said he was owed 120,000 rupees (\$1,637) and feared for his future without the money.

"I wanted to start a grocery store with (the money) but now I am running around filing complaints and job-hunting," said Krishnan, who did not use his real name due to the ongoing case.

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