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heft in Gulf: All is not lost for returnee Keralites, say experts

We have the full details of the people who returned via the 'Vande Bharat' repatriation mission.



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By Rajesh Abraham

Express News Service



KOCHI: Amid reports of ‘wage thefts’ running into hundreds of crores by Gulf employers of Keralites who returned to their state following job losses, experts have said there is still hope for the returnees to get the money owed to them. The experts said this will be possible if the Centre takes proactive steps, on the lines of the governments of Singapore and the Philippines.

“Indian embassies in the Gulf region should intervene by providing legal aid or pro-bono lawyers in wage theft cases and filing claims in the Gulf labour courts on behalf of the returnees,” said Divya Balan, who teaches migration studies at

Flame University, Pune. According to Norka, which handles the affairs of non-resident Keralites, nearly 12 lakh of the 15.4 lakh NRIs who returned to Kerala cited job loss as the reason for their return.

As per a report, the employers of several of the returnees committed ‘wage theft’ by way of non-payment of service benefits or wages, unpaid leaves, deduction of monthly wages and other measures.

Divya said India can take a leaf out of the governments of Singapore and the Philippines to get the unclaimed salaries of migrant workers.

“Singapore has set up a multi-ministry task force, which includes its Ministry of Manpower, to ensure that in situations where its workers employed abroad are not paid salaries, the government is alerted and informed so that it can approach the employers and take up the matter,” said Divya. She said the Philippines government has extended legal advice and aid related to salary claims for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in destination countries whose contracts were terminated due to the pandemic.

The ‘Kerala Wage Theft Report’, a repatriation survey by the Aluva-based Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS) released recently, found a large number of Indian workers were sent home in a hurry, on the promise that their dues will be credited to their Indian accounts, or were abandoned in their countries of employment by their employers. This prevented a majority of them from accessing justice mechanisms available in those countries, said the report. CIMS executive director Rafeek Ravuther said the unpaid dues, even on a conservative basis, would be over `1,200 crore.

“We still have time (to get the dues). We have the full details of the people who returned via the ‘Vande Bharat’ repatriation mission. We should create an international justice mechanism with the countries of employment, akin to what we did during the Kuwait War when we ensured payment of dues to repatriated Indians, by joining hands with the UN. The mechanism should have our judges as well as their lawmakers, policymakers, ministry of labour and the like. It should send the message that they are willing to hear the claim of every individual,” said Ravuther.

“The government needs to set up this mechanism. People will come forward if it does,” he said.