

The Plight of Migrant Workers in the Middle East and North Africa

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Global Research, September 17, 2015

Global Research 20 May 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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The ongoing refugee crisis has its roots in Western military interventions carried out under the guise of humanitarian efforts to protect civilians. The following article, posted in 2011, deals with the consequences of NATO-backed interventions in the Middle East and North Africa: namely, making it increasingly difficult for “countries of origin” to put in place “effective policies for the reinsertion of returning migrant workers into their labour markets by creating decent work where people live”. Read more below:

CAIRO, May 20, 2011 – As the world rallies in support of the popular uprisings sweeping across the Arab world, which were provoked by long social and economic injustice, the plight of migrant workers from Africa and Asia find themselves jobless, penniless and subjected to threats and beatings.

Many of the estimated twenty million migrant workers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are from poor countries whose leaders have long failed to put in place mechanisms to protect their nationals from abuse, inhumane working conditions, trafficking and a means for repatriation during times of crisis.

Migrant rights advocates – and workers themselves – say their remittances have contributed to increasing foreign currency reserves, reducing devaluation of labour sending country’s monies, investments in infrastructure and the repayment of foreign debts like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. But despite growing complaints of mistreatment, governments are unwilling to listen.

“For those in Bahrain, there were human rights violations previously but in the current crisis there is no where to go and most of the embassies are not equipped enough to take care of their nationals,” says Mohammad Harun Al Rashid, regional coordinator of CARAM (Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility) Asia. “These countries need to provide better representation in labour receiving countries. However, most labour sending countries are only looking at the remittances and not the working and living conditions of their citizens. The governments are not listening to their nationals and to rectify this problem they need to establish relationships with community leaders.”

Jan De Wilde, coordinator at the International Organization of Migration (IOM) office in Tunisia, says that although evacuation mechanisms are usually the responsibility of the employers or labour sending countries in situations like this the international community needs to step in and assist in evacuating third party nationals before matters get worse.

According to De Wilde, there are massive amounts of migrants – mainly from Bangladesh, the Philippines, Egypt, West and sub-Saharan Africa – streaming out of Libya since mid-February at a rate of 1,000-3,000 per day.

“Many have not been paid and are having a lot of difficulty getting food, medical care and many of the Black Africans have been severely discriminated against,” says De Wilde. “People are becoming very restless, impatient and fighting amongst themselves because one group thinks that another group is being favoured and they’re becoming very difficult to manage. The situation is going to become worse once the summer arrives as the temperatures are already over twenty during the day and they’ll be going up to fifty.”

Tales of mistreatment long before uprisings

South Asians in Bahrain, mainly migrant workers from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, India and Pakistan, constitute nearly fifty percent of the country’s population of 1.2 million.

Demographics like Bahrain are commonplace throughout the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, where the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates migrant workers comprise nearly forty percent of the workforce – and in some cases outnumber the population.

Usman is 43 years old and comes from the coastal city of Pasni in Pakistan. In his city, he was a bicycle repairman. He liked his job but with three mouths to feed, it was time to make more money. In early 2007, Usman decided to travel to Dubai where he was hired as a mason assistant.

Eight months into a two-year contract Usman suffered a severe injury to his left calf. It occurred when a crane, on a multi-story construction site, was hoisting a large crate full of electrical equipment. The crate had a nail sticking out of it, and it literally ripped his calf to shreds as it passed by him.

“I was dealing with the mortar mixture on the site, mixing it up in order to put it down on the brick, and then the crate passed by. I felt this horrible sting in my leg, and I was lifted a little off the ground...the next thing I know, I was bleeding and I went into shock. I could not feel my leg and could not see it because of all the blood,” says Usman.

The construction company took Usman to the emergency room where they patched him up. Later he was given a plane ticket back to Pakistan and told that he would receive no further assistance in Dubai. Before the injury Usman earned 700 Dirhams per month. The construction company allowed him to return for 520 Dirhams as a cleaner for the labour camp.

“If I didn’t come back, then I would make no money, and my family would suffer,” adds Usman. “I had to come back. But I can’t work the same things that I used to work.”

Since the Bahraini government ordered the crackdown on street protests, nearly eight migrants have been killed and forty-nine wounded with the majority of the attacks targeting

the Pakistani community.

Faraz Sanei, a researcher for New York-based Human Rights Watch in Bahrain says that although Indians represent the largest community in Bahrain with 350,000 migrants, Pakistanis are overwhelmingly visible in the riot police and are usually implicated in the deaths of protestors.

In addition, opposition groups calling for political and social reforms have long argued that the influx of Sunni nationals from outside in the last fifteen years is the government's attempt to change the sectarian demographics of Bahrain.

"Before the violence a lot Bahrainis when dealing with riot police complained that they couldn't speak to them because they don't share the same language or have limited Arabic. Whenever there are investigations in villages there is this us versus them mentality because of this language barrier," adds Sanei.

"The migrant worker issue is not the same as the Pakistani issue in that there are many Egyptians, Yemenis, Jordanians, Syrians and Pakistanis in the security and intelligence forces as well as the military that are naturalized so they are technically Bahraini citizens."

'We're like slaves here'

The winds of change, for more democracy, rights and decent work taking place in Yemen – as anti-regime protestors demand the immediate end of the thirty-two year authoritarian rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh – bypasses the approximately forty to sixty thousand Ethiopian domestic workers who are forced to work all day under mental torment and abuse.

In Yemen, which has an unemployment rate of thirty-five percent and is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world; Somali, Sudanese and Ethiopian female refugees or migrants work as housemaids for a monthly salary of merely seventy to one hundred and fifty dollars.

Despite incidents of violence targeting female migrant workers during street protests in Yemen have failed to make the press, ongoing maid abuse has definitely put countries in the Middle East in harsh spotlight.

Angelique, a 26-year-old domestic worker from Congo, escaped the conflict in her country and travelled to Lebanon on a six-year contract to work as a housemaid. Woken daily at 5:30am, she works 18 hours confined to the apartment, without any time off.

"I have only six months left and then I will go back to the Congo. You see Madame has cut off all of my hair. Every day I clean and cook. I sleep on the floor in the kitchen and I can't take any more of this life," says Angelique, who did not want to give her real name for fear of retribution, speaking from across the balcony.

"Even the dogs are allowed to go out but we're stuck. We're like slaves here."

Angelique earns just US\$100 a month, three times below the minimum wage, and sends all of it home to Congo.

Being stranded is not new for migrants

Western military intervention into Libya under the guise of humanitarian efforts to protect civilians broke new ground when NATO warships shelled a Red Crescent Society centre in Misurata, which has been catering to the wounds of those injured in the ongoing unrest. However, the dire need to protect civilians from the refugee and migrant community seems to be a desire not high on NATO's agenda.

But migrant workers being left stranded by their employers or their governments are not a new phenomenon in the Arab world. During the US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2006 summer war in Lebanon thousands of migrant workers were left to fend for themselves.

According to the UNHCR, nearly 140,000 foreign nationals have fled Libya via land borders. Including an estimated 69,000 Egyptians, who have crossed to the Egyptian border and another 75,000 Asians and Africans that have crossed into Tunisia while another 50,000 – including over 10,000 Egyptian workers – remain stranded in Tunisia.

Libya has been a major destination for migrant workers following the 1969 revolution as a massive influx of construction workers from Tunisia, teachers from Egypt and Palestine and health care workers from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria poured in to assist in rebuilding.

Twenty years later a second wave of migrants, mainly from Asia, sub-Saharan and West Africa arrived to take advantage of the relatively high salaries of almost \$300 per month, for unskilled labour.

Globally, remittances sent home by migrants and refugees have become a key feature in the socio-economic fabric of developing countries in Africa and Asia.

On the macro level, Dr. Ibrahim Awad, Director of the Center for Migration and Refugees Studies at the American University in Cairo, says that remittances assist in reducing chronic trade deficits and contribute in balancing the economy in countries like Egypt due to their reliance and countercyclical nature, which help sustain consumption and investment during economic downturns.

However on the micro level, labour sending economies could be at risk from the exodus of migrants fleeing violence in Libya as people supplying the labour take a hit, an increase in the demand of jobs as unemployed workers return and reliance on remittances to spur economic activity as a means of reducing poverty is halted.

“The crisis highlights the reliance of some migrant sending countries on remittances. In some countries remittances constitute over thirty percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) like in Egypt, which has a relatively high proportion of the GDP at sixty percent. Reliance on this money influx suggests that any reduction will mainly impact the household level as well as create external financing gaps, which are hard to fill,” said Dr. Awad in an interview with IPS.

With no end in sight, concerns are growing amongst some developing nations that turmoil in the region could spread to oil rich Gulf states where foreign labour accounts for more than eleven million of the workforce.

But instead of waiting for the rebellions to die down in order to send migrants to Libya again or redirect efforts in locating new markets, labour sending countries should adopt

appropriate policy measures to end reliance on manpower export and create incentives that encourage their nationals to say home.

“Migrant sending countries should not rely solely on migration as a means of solving unemployment. The issue of lack of jobs should be solved internally. Countries of origin should therefore put in place effective policies for the reinsertion of returning migrant workers into their labour markets by creating decent work where people live,” adds Dr. Awad.

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