



Forced Labour: Facts and Figures

The Cost of Coercion: Regional Perspectives

Middle East

Questions of forced labour and human trafficking are closely intertwined with migration in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf States where there is a high proportion of migrant workers compared with national populations.

Recent years have seen a steady increase in reporting on issues related to human trafficking and, to a lesser degree, forced labour in the region, as well as adoption of new laws against trafficking. In the process, more attention has been drawn to problems that previously were very seldom in the public eye.

Temporary Contract Work

Main concerns centre on the lack of adequate safeguards against abuses in the recruitment and employment of migrants for temporary work. These migrants are usually from outside of the region, often from Asia.

The ILO's 2005 Global Report highlighted the conditions of some domestic workers, who can be exposed to trafficking because of the absence of safeguards in recruitment systems. Since then other international organizations have looked into conditions faced by domestic workers in the Middle East. A 2006 visit by a United Nations Special Rapporteur on human trafficking to three Gulf States identified many abusive practices, including confiscation of passports and other identity documents, restrictions on freedom of movement, denial of leave, non-payment of wages and overtime work and long working hours.

There have also been reports alleging very harsh conditions of work in the construction and garment industries.

Moreover, some reports suggest that the *Kafeel* system of individual employer sponsorship for temporary contract workers is conducive to forced labour and trafficking. Experience elsewhere in the world, as well as in the Middle East, shows that sponsorship schemes can give the sponsor who possesses the work visa significant control over a worker. There is also sometimes illegal trade in such visas, including in the Gulf States. Some employers are directly involved in this business, while others outsource their recruitment work to labour placement companies, who in turn sell visas to recruitment agencies located in the sender countries. Costs are thus passed on to prospective migrants through inflated visa charges.

Other problems include altered contract terms and high recruitment fees. A survey in Pakistan, for example, found that migrants who had signed contracts before leaving were presented with new ones upon arrival in the Gulf in which the wages were about 10 per cent lower than originally promised.

Regarding recruitment fees, ILO research in 2007 on migrants who had returned to Bangladesh and Pakistan from the Gulf States found that while most viewed the experience as positive, the high costs of migration were making it less financially profitable for the workers. In Bangladesh, where average costs were about US\$1,400 for men and half that amount for women, the total cost of migration had risen by more than 30 per cent from 2000 to 2007 and generally had not been offset by an equivalent rise in incomes. In Pakistan, the average total cost for persons employed overseas was US\$1,000, more than 12 times the ceiling set by the Government. Most Pakistani migrants paid all fees in advance, with approximately half financing migration costs from their own savings.

Governments Respond

In response to these problems, governments in the region have been working with the ILO to promote fundamental principles and rights at work and improve systems of migration governance. In this context, the ILO presented findings to a Gulf Forum on Temporary Contractual Labour in Abu Dhabi in early 2008.

Other positive steps to combat trafficking and forced labour taken by some governments include training, analysis, law and policy reform and implementation mechanisms.

There have also been policy responses to the plight of domestic workers, with Jordan setting up a special hotline for migrant domestic workers, and the United Arab Emirates providing for criminal sanctions against sponsors who abuse their position with such workers.

Nonetheless, there is a need for many governments to be more proactive in addressing the root causes of the problems and drawing up appropriate policies and laws. In the Gulf, the level awareness about forced labour remains low among the general public and many government officials, and there is some reluctance to accept that there are abuses which may constitute forced labour and trafficking.

ILO Support

ILO activities in the region include extensive work with government officials, including labour inspectors, employers and trade unions to improve their knowledge about forced labour and trafficking as well as their capacity to act.

In Jordan, for example, an ILO programme has helped tackle the issue of forced labour and trafficking in export industries, especially garment-making. Under the programme, the ILO worked with the Government to draft a new law on trafficking, amend its Labour Code and establish an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Trafficking. The project also was designed to spread awareness about forced labour and trafficking among employers and workers.

The ILO plans to continue its efforts in the Middle East, with an emphasis on promoting better-regulated recruitment mechanisms and better monitoring, in cooperation with sender countries. There will be particular attention to public-private partnerships, ensuring that employers and workers are fully engaged with government drives to improve systems of labour contracting and job placement.

Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour

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May 2009