

The Story of Cassina: Trapped in War-Torn Iraq

Like most of her peers in Subang, West Java, Cassina had a strong desire to lift her family out of poverty as it had a debilitating effect on them since her marriage in 1996. Her husband's daily income as an ojek driver was inadequate to cover their daily needs and pay for their ten year-old son's monthly school tuition fees. Having heard the success stories about her fellow villagers working in Malaysia and Middle East, she decided she wanted to work in Abu Dhabi.

With the help of a local labor middleman, Cassina was recruited by labor supply company PT Delta Rona Adiguna. The recruitment agency required her to pay Rp 3 million but did not provide her with any training up to the time she departed to Abu Dhabi at the end of January 2007. She entered Abu Dhabi on a tourist visa and spent almost two months in a dormitory belonging to a foreign labor agency before being employed as a housemaid by a big family with a salary of US\$200 a month.

After working for a month, Cassina felt unhappy with her employer's nine member family, as they were treating her poorly and kept her working for more than 12 hours a day. "In reality it was slavery, rather than work. When my employer refused my resignation request, I ran away from the house one night and went to my agent asking for other employment. My agent was furious and detained me in an isolated room without any meals for two days," she said, adding that she was not paid for the two months she had worked for her employer.

When her agent finally agreed to find her other foreign employment in other city, she was then flown, along with several other migrant workers from Bangladesh, the Philippines and Indonesia, to another country the name of which the agency kept a secret. "Several times I asked the name of our destination, but instead I was told that we would soon arrive in a country where we would be paid well," she said.

After landing at an airport in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Northern-most province of Iraq, Cassina and her fellow migrant workers were housed in a dormitory where many other Indonesian migrant workers were also waiting to be deployed. At the start of her second month at the dormitory, she was deployed to a big Iraqi family with the promise of a monthly payment of US\$200.

While waiting for a job at the dormitory, she was afraid to go outside since she saw many foreign soldiers and heard bomb explosions almost every day. "You will never get out of here because this country is torn by a bloody war. We are in Iraq. It is impossible for you to go back home, instead you have to stay and work," she quoted Elly, a fellow worker from Lampung, as saying.

After working for three months she told her employer that she wanted to resign because she was unable to work for more than 15 hours a day. When she went back to her agency, the agency urged her to continue working and to honor her two year labor contract for which the agency had received UD\$4,000. She was then brought back to the dormitory.

One night her fellow worker, Elli, asked her to escape from the dormitory and they went to the local office of an international organization to seek help. The staff told them that they were unable to help them to go back home, unless they had their own passport and working visa. However, these documents were kept by their placement agency.

They stayed at a closed shopping mall for several nights before they were eventually found by their placement agency staff and brought back to the dormitory. "By then Elli and I were both in a bad condition. I could hardly speak because of a lung infection, while Elli suffered as a result of complications from an earlier breast cancer operation," she said. In spite of their health problems, the agency staff beat up both of them repeatedly as punishment for escaping.

After one week of such maltreatment in the dormitory, Cassina had no alternative than accept working for a new employer, an Iraqi official, Husein Jabari, who promised to pay her \$200 a month. The employer's residence was guarded by Iraqi soldiers 24 hours a day because of the poor security situation in the city.

One day, she got a chance to contact the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jakarta to ask for immediate assistance, but one of the senior officials instead told her to escape through her own efforts, saying that there was little that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could do to help her in the war-zone. She then managed to make phone contact with the Indonesian Embassy in Amman, Jordan, and talked with embassy staff who promised to help her and asked her to remain calm.

With help from the Indonesian Embassy in Jordan and Migrant Care in Jakarta, who hired a volunteer named Usman in Iraqi Kurdistan, she traveled from Iraq to Jordan and from there she flew back to Jakarta. On her arrival at the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, she was brought to the National Police General Hospital in East Jakarta for treatment of her stomach and psychological traumas.

"I am still receiving regular therapy at the hospital," she said, adding that she has vowed that she would never go abroad again to work. Her mother died while she was working overseas in 2004 and her father died 40 days before she arrived home. "I wish to be here to raise my son and I am now expecting my second child," she said. (*)