

Slavery in our times

Human Rights -

AMONG the many daily tragedies blighting the lives of Asian migrant workers in the Middle East is the harassment, physical abuse and cruelty they have to put up with if they want to stay. A recent issue of Sri Lanka's Daily Mirror informed us that more than 300 Sri Lankan women workers had left Bahrain over the last six months, complaining of "physical abuse, sexual harassment, non-payment of salaries and being over-worked".

According to Mr Higgoda, Sri Lanka's honorary consul to Bahrain, "We are handling many cases where the maids are assaulted by employers. Some were not paid for months and some were denied medical care, enough food or the right to go home, and also faced violence and harassment... If the maids want to leave their work and complain to the police, they are called runaways by their employers. As a result, the victim is usually deported, after serving time in custody."

An extreme case of this nature is that of Ms Sumiati Binti Salan Mustapa, a 23-year old Indonesian worker in Saudi Arabia, who was recently hospitalised after her face and mouth were savagely cut with scissors, and her body burned with a hot iron. Just seeing her slashed face is enough to give you nightmares. To the best of my knowledge, her Saudi employers - the people responsible for the attack - are still free, despite the government's assurances to the Indonesian authorities of its intentions to investigate the assault.

One reason Saudi employers get away with this routine mistreatment of foreign employees is that despite the terrible conditions many of them are forced to endure, many Asians are still willing to come to the kingdom. Currently, around 80,000 Indonesians flock to Saudi Arabia every year. And yet, talking about the attack on Ms Mustapa, the Indonesian foreign minister said: "Everyone knows about these

abuse cases, they happen all the time."

But both the employees and their governments are desperate for the remittances they send back home. Hence the conspiracy of silence. According to Human Rights Watch, many Asian domestic workers suffer "conditions of slavery". Saudi Arabia alone has some 8.8 million foreign workers, most of them from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. This works out to two foreign workers for every Saudi.

Despite the appalling conditions they work under, and the duration of their stay, none of these unfortunate people ever acquire citizenship rights. They are thus vulnerable to constant abuse with virtually no laws to protect them. Ignored by the police and their own governments, they fear deportation if they leave their employers.

This pattern is repeated across the Middle East with hundreds of cases of abuse being reported

throughout the region. Dubai built its skyscrapers on the backs of tens of thousands of brutally exploited South Asian construction workers, and yet they have remained invisible to the shoppers who flock to this island of glitz and fool's gold.

Then there was the scandal of child jockeys from Pakistan - some as young as five and six - who were tied on to racing camels. Many fell to their deaths, and others were crippled for life. It took years of international outrage to persuade the UAE government to ban this disgusting practice. Successive Pakistani governments remained silent spectators to this crime.

Migrant workers are exploited all over the world as mostly, they work in a grey area with few rights and little protection. But nowhere is the abuse as flagrant as in the Middle East. Because few employers responsible for assaulting their staff are ever prosecuted, most citizens feel they can torture those

they employ with impunity. States exporting this labour do not want to upset the host countries by demanding a proper enquiry and prosecution as they want to keep the petro dollars flowing into their coffers.

Had Asian workers been subjected to the same kind of abuse in the West as they are in the Middle East, the media and civil society groups would have been up in arms. As it is, millions of migrant workers have become citizens of the Western countries they live and work in. They and their families now benefit from all the advantages of being in welfare societies with free education and medical care and, above all, protection of the law.

What causes this widespread abuse of the weak in so many countries in the Middle East? Clearly, their seems to be a deep contempt for those not of Arab descent. And while Westerners are given favoured status, other non-Arabs are subjected to the worst

kind of racism. This despite our loud proclamations of the equality that supposedly exists in Islamic societies. These double standards are common knowledge, and yet few in our part of the world are willing to speak about it. The racism inherent in the situation has its roots in the early days of Islam. Tarek Fatah, the Pakistani-Canadian intellectual, has quoted Maulana Maudoodi, the founder of the Jamat-i-Islami, in his ground-breaking book *Chasing a Mirage*:

"Right from the start, the Umayyad government took on the colours of an Arab government in which the equality of the Arabs and non-Arabs was negated. In clear violation of Islamic principles, the Arab rulers imposed *Jazia* on non-Arab Muslims... Non-Arab Muslims felt that they were the slaves of the Arabs..."

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tween 661 and 750) Arab Muslims were granted honorific status relegating, in the process, non-Arabs to a status of second class citizens. Despite the Quranic injunction of egalitarianism, Arab sense of pride in Arab identity reasserted itself soon after the Prophet's (PBUH) death. Non-Arab converts to Islam, whatever their previous social status, were treated as second-class citizens."

And if this is their attitude towards non-Arab Muslims, imagine how they must feel about non-Muslim Asians. Clearly, this racist mindset has only grown stronger over time. Now, with egos bloated with billions of dollars in newly acquired unearned wealth derived from an accident of geology, many in the Middle East feel they are chosen above all others, and can mistreat those less fortunate than them.

Until states exporting surplus workers to the region begin to assert their rights, this modern version of slavery will continue.