

SOS from Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf

There are strange and very deplorable contradictions between the beliefs and the practices of the Gulf statesmen. They are very generous when it comes to providing disaster relief anywhere in the world, but they are very callous about ensuring fair wages to those who are working for them day and night, cooking their meals, cleaning their streets and buildings, building their roads, driving their cars, watering their fields, or guarding their homes.

MOHAMMAD A. AUWAL

PROPHET Muhammad (SA) said: "When you see a wrong being done, stop it with your hand; speak out against it if you cannot stop it; hate it in your heart if you cannot speak out; but hating the wrong in heart is the lowest form of faith."

Following this hadith, I am speaking out against a colossal injustice because I cannot change it by hand, nor can I absorb it silently. I am currently drafting a lengthy SOS from the blue-collar migrant workers in the Gulf countries. I want to briefly outline some points today, hoping to provide the details in future.

I am requesting the Bangladesh government to investigate where and how the Bangladeshi blue-collar workers work and live in the Gulf countries. The government must inquire into the systematic exploitation of the workers and the violation of their reproductive rights, their rights to get married in time, live with and take care of their loved ones, raise children, and so forth.

The problem is actually an open secret, but based on media reports, my personal travel and work experiences, and my interviews with hundreds of blue-collar workers and concerned people, I can reasonably claim that a systematic exploitation of unskilled migrant workers is widespread in all Gulf countries.

Briefly, the unskilled foreign workers generally in the Gulf countries, and particularly in Kuwait are under unfair pay, promised one salary figure during recruitment and paid another once they are "taken into custody" (literally made a captive workforce). They are forced to work long hours with minimal or no extra pay, beaten up or threatened with expulsion from the country if they complain about their non-payment of salaries, given no weekly or monthly or even annual holidays, herded into living like animals in extremely overcrowded rooms (making 20-36 people share one bathroom), and denied many of their basic human rights including the freedom to move around, to change jobs or employers, or even to visit their homelands. The conditions of those who work for households are sometimes even far worse.

	Assoc Prof of Comm.	Level II Engineer	Janitor	General Labourer	Grounds-keeper
US	\$56,816	\$61,254	\$23,226	\$25,045	\$27,884
Gulf States	Same or better	Same or better	\$1,231	\$1,231	\$1,231

Estimated Median Annual Wages of the Middle Income Skilled and the Unskilled Workers in the US and the Gulf States.

As early as in 1998, G. Pundyk wrote in New Internationalist: "Almost daily in Kuwait local newspapers report the injustices and crimes committed against domestic workers: a man doused with petrol and set alight; a Sri Lankan woman convicted of murdering her unborn fetus by repeatedly punching her stomach after being raped by her employer; a maid found hanging from her employer's fan; a Filipino woman picked up by two policemen and raped."

This description still reflects the pattern of what is reported happening on a daily basis in Kuwait even today. Recently a report in the Kuwait Times stated: "A Bangladeshi houseboy escaped death at the hands of his employer who he alleges brutally mistreated him in a lockup for nearly six months. The 25 year old houseboy was very weak, from severe malnutrition, when Kuwait Times met him at the Bangladeshi embassy."

Stories that appear in the censored or self-censored press of the Gulf states, however, are just the tips of huge icebergs of abuse and systematic exploitation under way in Kuwait and other Gulf countries. Furthermore, rarely do the media cover scholarly analysis of the workers' problems, and rarely do they explain how the workers are being exploited.

To understand this issue, consider the following points:

First, consider the difference between the ratio of the wages of the (middle income-level) skilled and the unskilled workers in the United States and ratio in the Gulf countries, as sampled in the accompanying chart:

The chart clearly indicates that an unskilled labourer in the US is paid roughly 50 percent of the salary of a middle-income skilled worker, but in the Gulf states, and specifically in Kuwait, a similar unskilled worker is paid roughly 2 percent of the salary of a comparable middle-

income skilled worker.

Second, the blue-collar workers are treated as disposable people and have absolutely no job security. They are given short-term one or two year contracts, and even though these contracts are often renewed, in most cases the workers have to pay for their extension, which leave them with little money to buy foods and clothes for themselves or to send to their families back home.

Third, there is a huge qualitative difference between the wages of the workers in UAE and those in Bangladesh or other developing countries. In Bangladesh, for example, they live at home and have greater purchasing power with whatever they earn, but in the Gulf countries, their wages do not allow them to support families in the vicinity of where they work and live and thus deprive them of their vital reproductive rights. The low wages provide only an extremely minimalist lifestyle for the workers abroad.

Fourth, the low wages do not allow the workers to make regular visits to their homes either. As a result, they end up spending all their reproductive time unmarried or away from the near and dear ones, which takes a huge toll on their emotional life. Typically, a young man can visit his wife once for a couple of weeks in every four or five years. Many of them have not visited home even once over 10 years. Recently, Rubon bin Rania reported in weekly Jai Jai Din how a Bangladeshi man, enslaved in a desert farm for 25 years, has never visited home and became emotionally unable to go back. Local Kuwaiti press including Kuwait television has reported even more tragic stories of suicides by migrant workers who failed to overcome their financial loss or emotional trauma.

Fifth, essentially the Gulf states are economically forcing workers to stay away from the loved ones for years. This practice contradicts Islamic law, which the Arab leaders

profess to uphold. Consider the fact that Omar Ibn Khattab, the second Caliph of Islam, after consulting with women, established a law that banned men from staying away from their wives for more than six months even when they were engaged in wars. He didn't just stop at making the law; he provided the appropriate adjustments to ensure that no one could violate it.

There are strange and very deplorable contradictions between the beliefs and the practices of the Gulf statesmen. They are very generous when it comes to providing disaster relief anywhere in the world, but they are very callous about ensuring fair wages to those who are working for them day and night, cooking their meals, cleaning their streets and buildings, building their roads, driving their cars, watering their fields, or guarding their homes. Kuwaitis, for example, top the generous donors in the Muslim world. Just recently they gave \$100 million to the quake victims in Pakistan and \$500 million to the Katrina victims in the US. Yet, oddly, it is in Kuwait where some of the most egregious violations of the poor workers' rights are taking place. It is the Kuwait embassy in Dhaka that requires Taka 1,250 from the poor Bangladeshis as a fee for authenticating academic transcripts or certificates, while the Kuwaiti embassy in Washington requires no such fees from the rich Americans.

There are many generous people who personally help the workers with their zakat money. In fact, they are the best of people, especially, the Islamic scholars who talk about these issues in mosques and on television programs to raise public consciousness. Even then, for the few persons who receive help primarily in the form of zakat or sadqah (optional charity), many more end up being badly exploited.

The conditions of the Bangladeshi and other workers in UAE may not be as horrible as they are in Kuwait. But based on the media reports, they may not be much better either. During the 2001-02, I saw how the workers were being transported between their "barracks" and worksites, squeezed cheek by jowl into tin-shed vehicles the way cattle are herded to slaughterhouses in many western countries. Lacking air-coolers, these vehicles are unsuitable for human transportation in the desert heat that goes up to 120 degrees.

Many recent media reports corroborate my observation and experience, as the following excerpt from Khaleej Times signifies: "For many, Dubai is a city that cares. But for four Asian expatriate workers

there is not even a roof to cover their heads. This reporter spotted unfortunate workers sleeping in the open near a grimy construction site without any basic facilities like toilets, electricity, or drinking water."

In the Gulf today, you can see workers from different ethnicities receive widely differing salaries for same work. For example, Kuwaitis, Egyptians, Indians, Nepalese, and Bangladeshis will have different salaries and living conditions while doing identical work.

Bangladesh government must remind the Gulf statesmen to take responsibility for what is being done to the hapless workers in their homelands. Maintaining an appropriate level of sensitivity, it should raise the issues of fair wages for the labourers. Government can remind them that giving an atom of fair wage (which is obligatory under Islam) is more important than mountains of optional charities. It should remind them that such exploitation would be condemnable, regardless of where it happens and whoever is victim (and also, it might not be limited only in the Gulf countries), but that it happens in the countries that call themselves Muslim countries and claim to be Muslims is all the more deplorable.

Ineffable is indeed the magnitude of abuse and suffering that are being visited up the poor Bangladeshi and many other expatriate workers. It is ineffable for two main reasons.

First, language is always a poor medium of communication. Second, it is risky for individuals like me to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Yet, we all must try our best to speak out against the above injustice, as we try to come up with systematic analysis of the problems and their possible solutions.

For now, as much as I ask the government to do its share in upholding the right and dignity of the people of the nation, may I request the journalists who care to dare highlight the human conditions of these people? Let us go where silence is and bring to the forefront the cries of those whose voices have been drowned in the din of politics and corruption. Their untold stories are available not only in Kuwait and other Gulf Arab states but also in the cities and villages of Bangladesh.

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The last Zambian textile factories?

A central focus of the sixth ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong is the non-agricultural market access (NAMA) negotiations, which include the textile sector. Critics of NAMA say the current thrust of negotiations is to reduce or even eliminate import tariffs. If so, NAMA will expose local Zambian manufacturers and businessmen like Naik and Zulu to more competition from foreign imports. NAMA critics warn that without any flexibility to protect their products from imports, local industries will not be able to develop to international levels of competitiveness.



A homeless boy plays with an anti-WTO poster distributed during a protest in Manila December 12.

MILDRED MPUNDU

EDWARD Naik stands outside his textile store in the heart of Lusaka, worrying about how long he can keep his business open. He manufactures, distributes and sells mutton cloth -- a multi-purpose, durable fabric for cleaning, widely used in factories, households and offices.

But in the past few years his company, JANVI Industries, has been experiencing extensive loss of business. Although the local demand for mutton cloth and other textiles is high, the Zambian textile industry is dwindling. What was once a vibrant sector in Zambia is almost non-existent.

Boyd Zulu worked in a textile factory for most of his life but lost his job when production costs soared and the company couldn't compete with imports from Asia that were beginning to flood the market. He opened his own tailoring business but found that Zambians were choosing to buy imported suits, as it was cheaper than having one made locally by a tailor.

"The cost of production for a single Zambian-made shirt is four to five times higher than a shirt from China. Even though the quality of locally-made clothes is better, a customer will still opt for the cheaper products, because of low wages that the majority of people in Zambia earn," says Zulu.

Naik and Zulu's situations are symptomatic of a wider trend throughout Africa, where local products cost too much for local people to buy, and factories and entrepreneurs are forced out of business.

The local manufacturers are also facing competition from textiles, clothes and cleaning cloths smuggled in from neighbouring countries. Zulu says that mutton cloth coming from Zimbabwe is sold more cheaply because the smugglers don't pay any VAT. He blames the Zambian government for his loss of business because it fails to clamp down on these illegal goods.

As well as having to compete with imports from Asia, the textile industry in debt-burdened Zambia has also suffered from a lack of investment in infrastructure, as Sizongo Siakalenge, a director in the Ministry of Commerce Trade and Industry (MCTI) explains. "Zambia had close to 250 firms

producing different types of garments and employed close to 25,000 people," he says. "But towards the end of the 1980s foreign exchange became very scarce and, as a result, many firms could not purchase spares or upgrade technology in order to compete with imports coming from outside Zambia."

"To date, there may be fewer than 20 textile firms in the country employing less than 2,500 people," says Siakalenge. "The government is trying very hard to reverse the situation by addressing the general investment climate in the country and particularly the need to reduce the cost of production."

The government has acknowledged that Chinese textile exports are a great challenge to economies of the developing world. An officer in the Zambian trade ministry hinted that the government was concerned at the upsurge of imports which were "killing" local industry, and was working on drawing up legislation to safeguard the industry.

But how realistic is the government's ambition to support the sector and attract investment in the future? A central focus of the sixth ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong is the non-agricultural market access (NAMA) negotiations, which include the textile sector.

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In November 2005, many African organisations took part in a meeting in Accra, Ghana, to discuss the challenges posed to African countries by the ongoing WTO negotiations. Participants demanded that their governments should not be pressured into accepting proposals from the rich industrial countries to fix maximum ceilings on tariffs, but instead should be allowed to determine their own tariff policies and how they are implemented.

But, according to the Zambia Association of Manufacturers' (ZAM) vice-chairman, Oswald Mwewa, the textile sector may benefit from reduced import tariffs. If production costs are lowered

because imported raw materials, spare parts and equipment are cheaper, then the manufacturing industry could recover and expand enough to attract foreign investment.

"We are demanding a reduction in duty on raw materials to zero per cent without discrimination. We are calling on the Ministry of Finance to align activities with a broad view of developing manufacturing capacity [with...] the government's vision on which way to go in terms of creation of wealth; therefore, do all that is necessary to promote growth in the manufacturing sector," says Mwewa.

The Commission for Africa, an initiative founded by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, published a report earlier this year -- Our Common Interest -- pushing for Africa to increase its capacity to trade through investing in its manufacturing infrastructure.

It warned that: "Africa will fail to achieve sustainable growth and poverty reduction, and fail to meet the Millennium Development Goals, unless it increases its diminishing share of world trade. Growing global competition makes this even more challenging than in the past."

But, the Commission for Africa says, developing countries like Zambia should have the flexibility to adopt trade policies that are more nuanced. It says that historically Europe and North America, and more recently the Asian "tiger" economies, have shown that a mix of openness and protection provides a managed path to global integration.

If Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world, is able to implement policies which pursue this recommendation, there may be some hope for businessmen and manufacturers to survive, Naik and Zulu say.

Both hope the Zambian government will protect them at the WTO this week and safeguard measures to create a flourishing local textile industry.

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Plight of the pilgrims

We should not forget the fact that most of the pilgrims from Bangladesh invest their entire life savings in order to perform this holy rite. Government authority responsible to this sector should have quality of services at an acceptable level. It is not nice to make the pilgrims hostages at the hand of the sectoral management. There must be transparent system of accountability from various government apparatus dealing with Hajj. It seems that in such matters, we may have a lot to learn from the Somali experience.



Pilgrims check their bags ahead of their departure to Saudi Arabia, at the Zia International Airport in Dhaka.

SAKHAWAT KHAN

It may not be an exaggeration if certain matters of governance of Bangladesh are compared to that of Somalia. Most of us may not be aware of the collapse of statehood/governance of Somalia that took place during early 1990. The state owned Somali Airlines was also ransacked, vandalized and looted by the rival insurgent factions, leading to its utter collapse

along with other sectors.

The civil war that broke out over Somalia by January 1990 has continued until now. As a matter of fact, Somalia does not have any viable centrally managed government for one decade and a half. Ethnic conflicts contributed to country-wide militancy, mass killings, vandalism, and looting of public properties.

I personally witnessed these scenarios in Somalia beginning

from 1991 until 2004. Despite the destruction of public infrastructure along with provisions of social services, there are many positive developments in Somalia that deserve appreciation.

One of these aspects is the management of pilgrims (Hujjas) in Somalia. In the dearth of a central government and in absence of a national carrier, Somalis have been managing Hajj very efficiently at their private capacities amid civil

war. It is indeed amazing to experience how a war-torn society works together for a greater spiritual objective.

Private business communities put their consorted efforts to charter airplanes from different air leasing companies and offer very competitive price and efficient services. I have the feeling that the private entrepreneurs in this case prefer spiritual values and blessings to making money. It may be the opposite in the case of our country. The government machineries dealing with the holy responsibilities are just looking for monetary gains out of the plight of the innocent pilgrims. They forget that very hard owned life savings of a retired person is placed at the disposal of the government.

I personally traveled by private owned chartered flights from Somalia to Saudi Arabia during 1992 Hajj. It was very smooth and pretty cheap. The organizers used to manage Hajj visas from neighboring Djibouti since there was no Saudi consulate in Mogadishu.

I traveled to Saudi Arabia from Kenya to perform Hajj in 1999. It was astounding to see how the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslim (SUPKEM) handled the entire Hajj matters. The Christian predominated government of Kenya fully relied on a registered community association like SUMKEM to manage the Hajj matters.

It is appalling to see the quality of management of entire Hajj programme by our government. I am sure that Bangladesh does not stand close to collapse like Somalia. Neither has it succumbed to ethnic conflicts and any dearth of governance. Why then the sectoral management of our government is so useless? Why does the government engage its sectoral monopoly in Hajj flights to prove its inefficiency at optimal level? Is it decent and humane for anyone to make Hajj (a holy rite) complex and nasty

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