

No money, no home: Left in the lurch

Homeless and penniless, hundreds of Indian workers in Sharjah are surviving on food handouts following job cuts

- By Faisal Masudi, Staff reporter
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Sharjah: Hundreds of Indian labourers have been left to fend for themselves in Sharjah after being shown the door by their employers. Homeless and penniless, some of the approximately 1,000-odd labourers have taken refuge in abandoned buildings and public parks in Rolla and survive on food handouts from Good Samaritans.

Their companies, mostly construction firms and manpower supply agencies, have "packed up and left" when business dried up in recent months. If this was not bad enough, many workers have been caught in a legal limbo over expired visas which they claim their employers failed to renew.

Some admitted to leaving their companies after reportedly putting up for months without salaries.

Though absconding employees invite penalties and work bans, the labourers are willing to take that risk. "What can we do? We can't work for free," said a worker on condition of anonymity.

"We want to go back home, but we need money for the plane ticket," said another labourer, who was laid off recently without pay.

Volunteers helping them with food supplies and paperwork formalities said the workers are scared of approaching the authorities. "Many of them can barely read or write and they don't know the legal recourse they can take," said Uday Kumar, one such volunteer who helps them after his day job. "They don't even have the money or transport to go to different departments like police, immigration, labour office, consulate and seek help," said Kumar.

Another social worker Dr Shashikala said the situation is far more complicated than it seems.

"There are many different cases. Some of them had their passports stolen. Now they don't have any documents whatsoever to prove their identity," said Dr Shashikala. "Northern emirates need a guarantor's passport to process a case for repatriation. Who will give them that? Some employment agents cheated them over visa fees, charging up to Rs100,000 (Dh8,250) — without arranging a real job here. Sometimes the employer demands fees from them for formalities like visa cancellation or air fare, which is illegal.

These workers have been tricked. Some don't even have money to buy food or a place to stay. How can they possibly afford a ticket to fly home?" she added.

The volunteers say the Indian Consulate and embassy have not done anything to address the problem. "They told us they are keen to help, but we have not seen any results. We have spent tens of thousands of dirhams from our own pocket. But this is their duty. Is there no budget or staff in the [Indian Community] Welfare Committee to address the situation?" said Dr Shashikala.

"The consulate and local authorities must open an amnesty like in the past when workers were given an emergency out-pass to go home. Is this not an emergency? They are human beings too," she said.

In a statement, the Consulate General of India in Dubai confirmed that some Indian expatriates were "stranded in Sharjah" due to financial slowdown and "other employment issues".

"The Consulate has already arranged for the repatriation of 40 of our nationals from this area after confirming their nationality. This is an ongoing exercise and we are in the process of completing formalities for the departure of the second batch after obtaining clearances from local authorities," the statement added.

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