

# Indian workers stranded in Saudi Arabia in Catch-22 situation

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Gulf is no longer a dream land for Indian workers. However, returning home empty-handed too won't resolve their problems...



Jobin George, an architect engineer from Kottayam district in Kerala, migrated to Saudi Arabia some 20 months ago with great hopes. After completing his engineering degree from a self-financing college with the help of bank loan, Jobin migrated to earn some petro dollars in a short time and close the loan so that he can settle in life without much delay.

But upsetting his plans, since June 2015, oil price started to make a free fall from US\$115 per barrel to US\$45, eventually pushing Saudi Arabia into crisis and Saudi Oger, a construction firm where Jobin was working, into trouble.

"I dreamt of petro-dollars. But now I am running pillar to post here in Saudi. Like others, I have also given power of attorney (PoA) to the Indian embassy in Riyadh claiming my eight months' pending salary. Waiting for them release my free ticket. Going back empty handed. But there are no other options," Jobin added.

Jobin and around 7,000 similar stranded Indians in Saudi Arabia have been given a deadline of September 25 to take accept an exit offer giving a PoA to the embassy for their pending salary and other end of service benefits by the Indian External Affairs Ministry. Stranded Indian workers staying back in different camps of Saudi Oger company are in a Catch-22 situation.

On August 23, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj tweeted that those who do not return by September 25th will have to make their own arrangements for boarding, lodging and return journey.

In a series of tweets on August 23, she said that the Indian workers who have lost their jobs should file their claims and return by 25th September.

"Filing claims and returning empty handed is the only option left for us. But two days ago, we heard that talks initiated by the Saudi Government to rescue our company have failed. Now, just forget about everything and go back. It's suicidal," Abilash Devasia, a mid-level employee at Saudi Oger, who has yet to get around INR 1,00,000 from the company as salary and other end of service benefits, said.

According to Reuters, the Saudi Arabian government has ended talks aimed at saving construction giant Saudi Oger, which is now facing the prospect of a multi-billion-dollar debt restructuring to stave off collapse, according to sources aware of the matter.

Quoting unnamed sources, Reuters' report added that the Saudi government owes Oger about 30 billion riyals (\$8 billion) for work it has completed and this huge backlog of payments has left Oger struggling to meet its obligations, including 15 billion riyals of loans, billions of riyals owed to contractors and suppliers, and 2.5 billion riyals to workers in back and severance pay. Meanwhile, Ismail Karupadath from Kodungaloor, a camp boss at Saudi Oger, said that majority of the workers had not been getting salary since January.

"In addition to non-payment of salary, majority of them don't have a valid labour card as the company failed to renew it on time. Now, food is also a problem. Even though kind hearted people come with food, it is still a problem," Ismail added. If Ismail and his friends are facing problems at camps, hundreds of mid-level employees, with more than 20 years of service, who are staying outside the camps with their families, including schoolgoing children, are in neck-deep trouble.

"Children are studying. Fee is pending. Have bought some time for clearing the dues...but how long? The government has told to leave. We are at our end of 40s. Who will give us a job now at this age? Back in India also, it is quite impossible," Mohammed Rizwan, a father of three children studying in an Indian Saudi school, said.

"Interestingly, knowing the situation that we are at receiving end, companies are not ready to offer us a job with decent package. They are trying to purchase us with a lower salary what we are getting now," Mohammed added. Ashely Williams Gois, regional director of Migrants Forum in Asia (MFA), an organization that fights the rights of migrants, said that they fully agreed with the position of the workers that no worker should be repatriated without all dues wages and benefits been settled by the employer.

"In repatriating without addressing the claims, the Indian state is complicit in the exploitation of workers. The Indian government must work with the Saudi government to ensure that either workers receive their dues or compensation that is agreeable to the workers," Williams said.

According to Rafeek Ravuther, a migrant rights activist from Kerala, other than providing food and shelter, the Indian government has failed in helping stranded workers in Saudi Arabia.

"Pakistan media reports say that Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has approved Pakistan Rs 500 m for families of Pakistani workers stranded in Saudi Arabia. Philippine media reported that Saudi King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has provided SR100,000,000, or P1.2 billion, for the Overseas Filipino Workers' welfare. What has the Indian government done so far," Rafeek who is a regular attendee of global meetings with ILO and other UN agencies, asked.

"Workers are being evacuated as if they are in a war zone. The workers were stranded because the company broke. Initiating plans to bring back Indian workers is a good one. But while bringing back, the Indian government should stand up for their rights and also announce some sort of rehabilitation programme," Rafeek said adding that even tickets are being provided by the Saudi government.

On August 4 in Rajya Sabha, Swaraj had made a suo motu statement during Zero Hour that the Saudi government has decided to send labourers at their own expense.

In March, news of Saudi Oger faltering was reported by Saudi media. In July, following non-supply of food at the camps, the workers at Saudi Oger took to protests to streets, which drew more media attention, forcing the governments to intervene in the issue.

In August, Indian External Affairs' junior minister VK Singh had rushed twice to Saudi Arabia to mediate with workers and the authorities and resolve the issue. However, both the visits have failed to make much progress in resolving the crisis, especially in finding a solution for the workers' unpaid salaries.

Saudi Oger and other companies had shut down operations as declining oil price had started making a deep dent in Saudi economy. In a lesser degree, the same thing is happening in other GCC countries too. A World Bank report in May stated that remittances to India, the world's largest remittance recipient, decreased 2.1 per cent last year to \$68.9 billion. This marks the first decline in remittances since 2009.

The World Bank had warned of a dip in remittances in its note a few months ago, saying that remittances by the diaspora would decline because of a global economic slowdown and a sharp drop in global crude oil prices. Recently, Kerala's Finance Minister Thomas Issac also expressed his concern over the dip in remittance.

"For the first time since the Gulf boom started, we may have negative growth of remittance this year," Isaac had said.

According to Isaac, Indians returning from the Gulf after losing their jobs will find it difficult to reintegrate into Kerala's economy, because remittances drying up also means jobs dwindling in the state.

In the real estate and construction business for instance, which is driven largely by remittances from the Gulf.

A massive 35 per cent of Kerala's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is made up of remittances or money sent back to their families by people working in West Asia.

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