
MIDDLE EAST

Dubai's Doldrums Spark Exodus of Migrant Workers

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About 10 million foreigners work in the Gulf states. But, with Dubai's economic boom ground to a halt, foreign workers – including many from South Asia – are being sent home ... often to uncertain futures.

Abdul Wahab is in the kitchen of his new house. His wife, Neeza, pours glasses of orange drink for him, their two children and some friends. He is back from Dubai and, for the first time in 24 years, his visit is not just a few weeks of home leave. He and about 1,700 other dockworkers at the Dubai Ports Authority were recently laid off. There was no warning, no chance to look for alternative employment. It all happened in one day.

After his shift they came and gave them the paper saying their job was over. There was no time to think. The workers' camp is surrounded by the military. So they simply went back home.

But coming back to India has been bittersweet for Abdul. He says tough choices lie ahead for them, as with many of those returning from Dubai. Abdul is considering selling his new house for a smaller one, using the profit to keep their two children in private schools. Still, Neeza could not be happier that he is home.

She says she hopes that he is back for good. She says working a government job and raising two children, alone, take a toll.

Abdul is part of a reverse migration of tens of thousands of migrant workers from South Asia who have looked to the Gulf countries as a source of employment since the oil boom of the 1970s. The boom helped Dubai finance huge construction projects.

"[The oil boom] triggered massive demand for overseas workers. And, that

was a golden opportunity for low-skilled and mid-level-skilled people to find highly paid jobs," said Binod Khadria, an economics professor who directs the international migration and diaspora studies project at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

Of the six million people who live in the United Arab Emirates, which includes Dubai, more than five million are foreign nationals, and more than three million of them are registered as unskilled foreign workers.

Khadria says most of those laborers come from India and most of the Indians come from Kerala, where one in six workers is employed overseas. But, with Dubai's once-soaring economy hit by a global downturn and many construction projects put on hold or abandoned, migrant workers are being shipped home by the planeload.

"The psychology is on, now that it's coming to an end. They have that sense, but they also are hopeful that the gravy train can find other routes. Europe is opening up. East Asia is opening up. Those are other avenues [for employment]," said Khadria.

Kerala's economy is counting on it. People from Kerala working abroad sent home about \$5 billion a year. Their remittances boosted Kerala's economy by nearly 25 percent.

Rafeek Ravuther is host of *Migrants World*. It is a TV show about Keralans working overseas. He says returning Indians complain that even in a rising India, salaries are way too low. Some have had to take their children out of private schools. But Rafeek has noticed something else.

"If they are coming back to Kerala, the kinds of jobs they did in Dubai, they will not do in Kerala," he said.

Why not?

"Because they will not go for low, meager jobs," he said.

Ravuther says it is a pride thing. ANY job in Dubai was seen as so prestigious that bride-seeking bachelors often added "works in Dubai" in their matrimonial ads. Now, with those jobs looking more tenuous, potential brides are not as impressed.
