

Middle East Times

Jordan pledges crackdown on foreign worker abuse

By AFP

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Jordan vowed on Thursday to crack down on abuse of foreign workers in Jordan-based textile factories following what it called a "disturbing" US rights group report detailing alleged violations.

"The National Labor Committee report actually gives us the added information to follow up on violators of workers' rights in Jordan," labor minister Bassem Salem said in a statement.

He described the findings of the report, carried out by the New-York-based non-government rights task force between March 2005 and April 2006, as "disturbing but not surprising".

The 168-page report "US-Jordan Free Trade Agreement Descends Into Human Trafficking and Involuntary Servitude" released this month gave a scathing account of the conditions of migrant workers employed in Jordanian textile factories that export garments to the United States exempted from tariffs.

The factories, which employ mainly Asian workers from Bangladesh, China, India and Sri Lanka, are mostly foreign-owned.

They are located in so-called Qualified Industrial Zones set up jointly by Israel and Jordan to bolster their 1994 peace treaty with encouragement from the United States. In 2001 Jordan became the first Arab country to sign a free trade agreement with the United States.

The report, researched in Jordan and Bangladesh, claimed that "tens of thousands of guest workers [in Jordan are] held in involuntary servitude".

It alleged that migrant workers "are not provided pay stubs or time sheets ... prohibited from organizing", are stripped of their passports upon arrival, beaten if they complain and live in unhealthy environments.

The rights groups researched more than 25 factories, including the Hi Tech Textiles in northern Jordan that produces garments for US giant retailer Wal-Mart and Gloria Vanderbilt.

"For over 90 percent of the Hi Tech employees who are guest workers from Bangladesh ... working conditions and treatment are anything but fair," said the report.

"They are held under conditions of indentured servitude, stripped of their passports and forced to work 100-hour weeks, while being cheated of more than half the wages legally due to them.

"The workers also report being routinely slapped and even beaten with belts," it said.

At Al Shahaed Apparel and Textile, which also produces garments for Wal-Mart and K-Mart, workers "could be routinely forced to work 72-hour shifts while being paid just two cents an hour", the report said.

"We have to say that there are 65 workers in Bangladesh ready to testify as to the horrors they faced at the Al Shahaed factory in Jordan," it added.

Salem acknowledged that the Jordanian labor ministry "has violation files on several companies" but said that many of them have been shut down as part of a crackdown on violators by the authorities.

"We have won the battle but not the war as other companies like this will spring up continuously with new names," Salem said.

He also reported that the labor ministry and the foreign textile manufacturing association, were preparing "a binding code of conduct document to ensure that employers maintain decent working standards and conditions".

"In addition the ministry is developing its own procedures to monitor the extent to which companies abide by this 'Golden List'," Salem said.

"From now on, all permits for foreign workers will depend on the factories abiding by this list," he said.

According to Salem only 10 out of the 100 export manufacturing companies working in Jordan "are problematic".

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