

Workers in Dubai struggle to get paid

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A few streets away from Dubai's multimillion-dollar skyscrapers, thousands of foreign workers crowd into tiny rooms in concrete apartment buildings, trying to get some rest after hours of back-breaking work in the sun.

These labourers are laying the foundations of a frenetic construction boom in this Gulf city of wide highways, crane-speckled skies and cool shopping malls stocked with the latest in designer chic for customers flush with petrodollars.

Despite this very visible wealth, some building firms have been holding back wages, making tough lives tougher for the workers whose families back home rely on their wages to survive. "It's been six months since I've been paid, but what can I do? There's no work in Pakistan either," said Razzak, who lives in a two-by-two metre (6.5 feet) room with five other labourers and supports a family of three at home.

Thousands of foreign workers have gone on strike over unpaid wages in the United Arab Emirates this year, and the authorities have now said they will crack down on offending firms. The United States has been urging the UAE and other Gulf Arab states to amend their worker rights laws by making them conform to the International Labour Organisation's standards in order to qualify for a proposed free trade pact.

Driven to action after months of missed wages, normally subdued foreign workers, who are behind the rapid development drive that has transformed the UAE into a modern state, have protested at state labour offices, consulates and building sites.

"Maybe five out of a 100 companies are fine, but the rest are bad," said Razzak, standing among a group of men with dirty towels wrapped around their waists. None of the men wanted to give their full names or identify the firms they work for. Razzak's wage, when he gets it, is around \$163 per month.

Eager to leave: Foreign labourers, as well as middle and high-income expatriates lured by tax-free jobs, make up around 85 percent of UAE's four million people. In Dubai, the Gulf's booming business hub, buses line up every day outside the workers' bare-bones accommodation to ferry them to the construction sites.

They drive along crowded U.S.-style highways, past the gleaming towers that they have helped build, heading to another day toiling in the stifling heat and humidity.

Buoyed by high world oil prices, Dubai has one of the highest per capita construction spending rates in the world, according to the Middle East Economic Digest. But construction firms sometimes cut corners during lean periods between projects by

holding back wages from vulnerable foreign workers, who were too afraid of deportation to complain.

Now, after the string of protests, the authorities in Dubai have pledged to act, threatening to impose stiff penalties on firms that do not pay workers on time. “We will make sure through our sources that companies enforce the rules. We have our own way of dealing with this,” said Brigadier Saeed Matar Bin Bileila, chairman of a committee specifically set up to tackle labour complaints.

The government said companies delaying payment would not be awarded government or semi-government contracts or allowed to recruit more workers. So far, there have been few reports of actual action taken against specific companies and protests have continued.

Scores of Indian workers demonstrated outside the Indian consulate recently. They said their families at home were struggling to pay debts, forcing them to take out loans. “We take small loans from each other ... and each time the interest increases,” Razzak said. Khalid, also from Pakistan, lives in a camp opposite a landfill site. The stench permeates his living quarters.

He has no health insurance and he had to borrow 135,000 Pakistani rupees (\$2,256) to get himself to Dubai. “I don’t get a monthly salary. If I lay the required 200 bricks, I get 25 dirhams, if not, then I get less. And they didn’t pay me the first two months,” he said.

“I spend 150 dirhams for my food, and 50 for soap and other things. On the Friday holiday, I barely have time to clean up the house and cook food. “They said I would find a better life in Dubai, but I didn’t. Once I pay off my loan, I’m leaving.”