

LABOUR-SINGAPORE: Unscrupulous Agents Need to Be Weeded Out

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SINGAPORE, Dec 13 (IPS) - Kalaivanan's recruitment agent back home in Tamil Nadu, India, guaranteed him a salary of 336 U.S. dollars a month and at least one year of employment after he arrived in this city-state.

Kalaivanan's father thus proceeded to borrow 2,914 U.S. dollars to pay the agent.

Three months after his arrival however, the 21-year-old worker almost lost a leg at an accident at his construction site. But his agent refused to take responsibility, saying that was the job of the insurance company.

After almost a year, the insurance firm offered Kalaivanan 4,000 Singapore dollars (2,419 U.S. dollars) as compensation. But he finds it grossly inadequate and is appealing against it.

Meantime, he has no job, no place to stay and no money for medical expenses. He is being looked after by Raja Mohan, social and welfare secretary of the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Hindu temple here.

Kalaivanan is one of hundreds of migrant workers from India and Bangladesh who have been left stranded here by unscrupulous recruitment agents - both here and in their home countries.

These agents squeeze out thousands of dollars after promises of jobs and high income in this rich island state of four million people, which hosts some 500,000 foreign workers.

Many of them work in the construction industry and in garbage and cleaning services, jobs that many Singaporean workers shun due to its low pay.

In June this year when some 200 Indian workers left stranded by the collapse of a large construction company, Wan Soon Construction, staged a sit-in at their embassy, the plight of foreign workers here came to public attention once again.

It is by no means a new, or unique, issue. But Mohan told IPS that the biggest problem is that foreign embassies are not doing enough to take up - with the Singapore government - the working conditions under which their citizens are employed here.

"The two governments should work together to investigate agents on the different conditions (of what was promised and what is given here)," he said.

The workers at the sit-in were owed between 1,813 to 2,951 U.S. dollars each by the

company, which had not paid their wages for at least six months.

After the Ministry of Manpower intervened, the company directors offered to pay each of them 121 U.S dollars and the insurance company another 241.8 U.S. dollars, with the rest to be paid in "due course" after they returned home. The workers refused the offer.

This led a local non-government organisation, Think Centre, to ask in a weblog posting: "The labour laws (which applies to foreign workers) says all workers must be paid at least once a month. (But) employers are frequently sending back foreign workers with just a few hundred dollars when they owed each worker a few thousand dollars.. Is this fair and just?"

There are other mechanisms that can help migrant workers seek some redress, but these come up against problems of discrimination, integration, communication and lack of awareness of foreign workers' perspectives and human needs.

Voluntary social worker Umi Zarina Abdullah, president of the Hand-in-Hand Society, says she gets "very angry and upset" when she listens to stories from migrant workers. "They do odd jobs Singaporeans will not do," she pointed out in an interview. "Some clean our rubbish, but they are not rubbish."

She says that many find it difficult to negotiate with the Ministry of Manpower when they have problems because the public servants "don't understand their English". This is where she has come in to bridge the communication problem.

Mohan adds that many do not realise that migrant workers are often wary of dealing with the police, because at home these law enforcers would end up asking for bribes or mistreating them.

"They are scared to go to the police (when they are mistreated by employers or agents), though Singapore police are very helpful and they will never take a bribe," he points out. "The government should educate foreign workers when they come here on how to get help from the police."

But, Abdullah told IPS, many agents who mistreat the Indian workers are local Tamils who speak their language - and that some companies hire these men as "security officers" to stop workers from going to the manpower ministry to lodge complaints.

The agents who bring the workers here usually "lease" them to a local company at about 60 Singapore dollars (36.27 U.S. dollars) a day, of which the worker gets only about one-third. Some do not even get that, as money for lodging or food may be deducted from it, or they may not get paid for months - which is illegal under Singapore's employment laws.

"The agents suck these poor people and get rich," claims Abdullah. "One agent told me that they help these poor people to get jobs here. I said, 'you are rich because you exploit

them'."

Though there are about half a million documented foreign workers in Singapore, only 74,000 of them have joined the National Trade Union Council (NTUC) and another 4,500 are members of the Building Construction and Timber Industries Employees Union.

When Wan Soon Construction collapsed, NTUC's Migrant Workers Forum provided for the workers' immediate needs for food and accommodation.

But much of the burden of looking after stranded workers has fallen on the voluntary welfare services sector, many of which are supported by Hindu, Sai Baba, Christian and Buddhist charities.

Elizabeth Tan, executive director of the Catholic-run Archdiocesan Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People, believes that since employment agents take a lot of money from these workers, they should be made liable to pay up costs when things go wrong upon arrival at the host country.

"The Ministry of Manpower is in the process of putting in place policies that will make agents responsible or accountable by law to the migrant workers," Tan told IPS.

But this would be far from easy.

"When they took our money, they got me to sign a paper saying that if I come back after two or three months, they will not be responsible for it," explained Kalaivanan in an interview. "I never thought I would be cheated. I wanted to make a lot of money here."

Many workers have told welfare workers similar stories.

"In reviewing laws, the government must make it compulsory that agents give proper orientation to its workers once they arrive here about workers' compensation, the employment law and where to go for help," added Mohan.

Meanwhile, Abdullah is planning the official launch of her Hand-in-Hand Society in January. She hopes that the government will give them premises and financial assistance to continue helping workers who get into strife here through no fault of theirs.

"These agents have no shame. They are daylight robbers," Abdullah says angrily. "I'm a mother to foreign workers and I want them to take back good memories of Singapore."
(END/2004)