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Saudi Arabia -- Asian workers continue to suffer behind closed doors

Asian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are at risk of human rights violations such as floggings, amputations, torture and executions, and are denied basic protection by employers and the government, Amnesty International said today on International Labour Day.

Foreign nationals make up 60-80% of the Saudi Arabian workforce and most are from Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Philippines and Nepal. For most of them the opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia offers a chance to escape from poverty and provide their families with a better future.

"Asian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are particularly vulnerable. They suffer human rights abuses in silence and solitude with no one to turn to for help," Amnesty International said today.

Asian migrant workers are mostly employed as domestic help or manual workers and like other workers are not protected by any trade unions. Their sponsors often confiscate their passport and they are forbidden to change jobs or travel from where they work. Many suffer at the hands of their employers on whom they are completely dependent. Some are not paid and are vulnerable to abuse by employers.

Once arrested they may be tricked or coerced into signing a statement in Arabic, which they don't understand. They are not informed of their rights, nor of the judicial process that awaits them. They have no access to a lawyer and are often denied consular access. Letters to their family back home may have to be smuggled outside the prison. This, coupled with the lack of access to influential members of society to intercede on their behalf, means that they are more likely than Saudi Arabians to be executed, flogged and suffer amputation.

Indonesian domestic worker Soleha Anam, was executed in 1997 in connection with the murder of her employer. Her family tried to get help from the Indonesian embassy and the labour supply company, but were brushed aside. They learnt of her execution only when the press reported it.

Of the 767 executions recorded by Amnesty International between 1990 and 1999, over half were migrant workers and a high proportion of those were Asian.

Filipino national James Rebenito was convicted of murder and executed in June 1996. He was held incommunicado for over two years before the Saudi Arabian authorities informed the Philippines embassy he had "confessed to murder". Despite requests from family and consular officials for access to his trial, his wife was allowed to see him only once before his execution. She told Amnesty International that he proclaimed his innocence and had witnesses to prove it. All were questioned by police but none were called to testify at the trial.

Female migrant workers are particularly vulnerable as targets of discriminatory practices. Nieves, a Filipina who was working as a maid in Riyadh in 1992, was invited by a married couple to celebrate the wife's birthday at a restaurant. A group of mutawa'een (religious police) entered the restaurant, saw the group, and arrested them on suspicion of prostitution. She was deceived into signing a statement in Arabic which she thought was a release form. Nieves was sentenced to 25 days' imprisonment and 60 lashes, which were carried out.

Migrant workers who practice religions other than the officially sanctioned Sunni Islam risk arrest, detention, ill-treatment and deportation. Christians, Sikhs and members of other religious minorities have been targeted for holding informal private worship groups in their homes or for possessing religious literature.

"I was at my most vulnerable state when the police again pressured me to admit or else I would continue receiving the beating. 'We will let you go if you sign this paper. If not, you may as well die here.' Badly bruised and no longer able to stand another beating, I agreed to put my thumbmark on the paper not knowing what I was signing." said Donato Lama, a Filipino arrested in 1995 on suspicion of preaching Christianity and sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment and 70 lashes.

Governments with nationals working in Saudi Arabia should be making every effort to protect these workers. They should seek information about their nationals in prison, visit them, attend court hearings and press for fair trials with access to defence, interpreters and the right to appeal. They should also take account of human rights violations when considering agreements with Saudi Arabia including trade, cultural exchanges or defence cooperation.

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