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Hundreds of Indian construction workers possibly stranded in Iraq

Evidence has emerged which suggests that several hundred Indian nationals may be stranded in the Najaf province of Iraq, unable to return home because their employer refuses to return their passports.

All the workers are reportedly employed by an infrastructure and construction company. Amnesty International India spoke with some of these workers, who said they have not been paid salaries for the past five months.

Baljinder Singh (name changed), one of the migrant workers, told Amnesty International India over the phone: "The employer holds all our passports and refuses to return them. We have been restricting ourselves to the company premises since the conflict began because we are scared. Without our passports we can't leave this country, and every passing day makes us feel more and more unsafe. We just want to go home."

Baljinder Singh said that the workers had raised this concern with the Indian Embassy in Baghdad, which asked them to provide their passport details via text message. The workers sent the details on the morning of 19 June and are now awaiting a response.

Daljit Singh (name changed), another employee at the company, said: "I have been working here for over two years and my employer is withholding more than US\$1,500 of my salary. Most of my colleagues are in the same situation."

The workers said their employer had told them that they were safe and would be moved to safer locations if they perceived a threat from the armed groups led by the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

Avtar Singh (name changed), another employee, said: "Many of us have huge debts back home. But we don't care about money anymore. We only want to return to our families immediately. We are only about 200km from the conflict zone. Danger is approaching and we can feel it."

Amnesty International India called the main telephone lines of the construction company as well as the mobile phones of three of its managers on June 20, but could not speak to anyone to ask for their response to the allegations being made by some of their workers against them.

Migrant workers, including those from India, are among the most vulnerable groups in Iraq as fighting between government forces and armed groups led by ISIS spreads to other areas in the country. Around 46 Indian nurses are trapped in a hospital in the city of Tikrit, which is controlled by armed groups. There are reports that ISIS and other armed groups have abducted 40 Indian workers in the city of Mosul. On 20 June, 44 workers, including Turkish nationals who were abducted near the city of Kirkuk on Wednesday were handed over to the police forces in Kirkuk.

Amnesty International calls on ISIS and other armed groups to immediately and unconditionally release unharmed all civilians they are holding as hostages, and end all attacks on civilians.

Under international humanitarian law, state and non-state actors are obligated to take necessary precautions to avoid endangering the civilian population. The parties to the conflict must facilitate the safe passage of all civilians wishing to flee the fighting. Amnesty International also calls upon the Kurdistan Regional Government and the authorities of neighbouring countries to provide fleeing civilians with refuge.

PUBLIC DOCUMENT

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