

INDIA'S RESCUED BONDED LABORERS REBUILD LIVES IN 'DREAM HOMES'

CHENNAI: Born into debt bondage, S. Appu spent 25 years confined to a rice mill in south India, watching his father repay a debt, and then working tirelessly to pay it off himself. When he was freed from the mill in Guduvanchery in Tamil Nadu state in 2015, he did not have a place to call home. "Home had always been the rice mill," Appu, 27, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "I even married there, all the while unaware that there was a world outside that space."

But today Appu lives in his own house, designed and built by students of Chennai's Madras Christian College as part of a project funded by charities and the government to help rescued bonded laborers get back on their feet. Before moving into a one-room brick house in December, Appu was living in a makeshift shelter on a piece of land given to him and eight other families rescued from the same mill by the Tamil Nadu government.

"We found them living in temporary shelters during the 2015 floods that swept the region," said Jesserson Joel, a 22-year-old student, who helped to build Appu's new home. "They were practically living in the open, unprotected and exposed. They needed shelter." India banned bonded labor in 1976, but it remains widespread, with millions like Appu from the marginalized Dalit and tribal communities working in fields, brick kilns, rice mills, brothels or as domestic workers to pay off debts.

Last year, the government announced plans to rescue more than 18 million bonded laborers by 2030, and increase compensation for rescued workers by fivefold as part of efforts to tackle modern slavery. But without homes, land and jobs, it is easy for rescued workers to slip back into debt bondage, campaigners say. "The compensation amount is given, but for all other welfare schemes, including housing and land, they have to fill in forms and follow procedures," said Sam Jebadurai from the charity International Justice Mission, which works to rescue bonded laborers and help them rebuild their lives. "These take time and many don't follow through."

Living in tents

When he was asked where he would want to live as a free man by officials that had helped to rescue him, Appu recalls shrugging his shoulders and muttering that "it didn't matter". "Actually, I didn't even know the name of the village my parents came from," he said, sitting on the steps of his new home, watching his daughter smother her face with powder.

"And besides, no one had ever asked me what I wanted." Appu ended up living with other rescued laborers on the edge of a village in Tamil Nadu's Kancheepuram district in tents provided by a non-governmental organization. "These generational bonded laborers, all from the Irula tribes, had practically been forgotten," said Prince Solomon, assistant professor and field coordinator for the college project. "One of my students waded through a lake to reach them." Shocked by their plight, the students quizzed the families about their needs and began mapping out a project to build them permanent homes.

'Dream home'

By mid-2016, the foundations of the first set of homes had been laid. Each family promised to work with the students to develop their homes, replacing plastic and asbestos sheets with concrete pillars and roof. Appu said with its garden, enclosed bathroom and a tiled roof, his house was a dream home. The homes which were designed to be held up by stilts, sit three feet (0.9 metres) above ground to limit the damage done by future flooding. Another key feature are proper toilets to replace the open-air bathing areas used by women - known as "four sticks and a sari" because they are formed by planting sticks in the ground around which women wrap their saris for privacy while bathing.

"A woman told me that she finally felt safe," Joel said. "(Before) they used the forest as a toilet, always wary of snakes and never venturing out after sunset." The pace of construction has depended on the flow of funds. The students are waiting for another injection of cash to complete house number 12, the last home at the end of the street. "It's good to have a proper roof over our heads," a group of women told the students. — Reuters



ZAGREB: The logo of the Balkans' main food producer and retailer Agrokor is displayed on the facade of the headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia. — AFP

BALKAN RETAIL GIANT IN CRISIS

TENS OF THOUSANDS FEAR FOR JOBS

ZAGREB: From cashiers and farmers to drivers and travel agents, tens of thousands of people are fearful for their jobs linked to the Balkans' biggest food producer and retailer, as it struggles with crushing debt. The financial woes of Croatian group Agrokor have dominated headlines in recent weeks after global agencies began slashing its credit rating. That has rattled Agrokor's 60,000 employees in the region, two-thirds of whom are in Croatia making it the country's largest employer. Agrokor's debts were estimated in September at six billion euros (\$6.3 billion) - an alarming sum for a company whose revenue of 6.7 billion euros accounts for 15 percent of Croatia's gross domestic product (GDP).

The group's leading business is the supermarket chain Konzum, but it has acquired a wide range of companies including in agriculture, food production, tourism and distribution. Also anxiously watching developments are Agrokor's small suppliers, who after months of waiting for payments now wonder if they will be paid at all-and to whom they will sell in the future. "It is hard to continue production without money, but it is also difficult to enter a new market," said Zvonimir Belic, a leading regional tomato producer who currently sells around a third of his goods to Agrokor.

"It's not only about saving Agrokor, but about saving Croatian firms. We are running out of time... Decisions need to be taken," Belic said. The impact goes beyond the Balkan country of 4.2 million people. Agrokor has businesses in neighboring Bosnia, Serbia and Slovenia, while its network of suppliers means tens of thousands more are affected in a region where unemployment runs high. "I am afraid that Agrokor will be a very difficult issue in Serbia too," Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said this week in Bosnia, where he discussed the



ZAGREB: Cars are parked in front of a building of Konzum - a leading retail chain in Croatia, and part of Agrokor in Zagreb, Croatia. Agrokor faced with crushing debt, reached a deal with creditors to help stabilize the troubled company. — AFP

crisis with his Croatian counterpart Andrej Plenkovic.

Too big to fail?

Analysts say Agrokor, whose main creditors are Russian state-owned banks Sberbank and VTB, accumulated debt through aggressive expansion and expensive borrowing-a snowball that eventually turned into an avalanche. In January, Agrokor withdrew from a loan deal with international creditors, triggering a surge in its bond yields. Some companies within the group had their accounts frozen due to unpaid state taxes and obligations towards suppliers. "Financing was short-term, under unfavorable conditions... while expansion was too fast on very fragile financing sources," economic analyst Luka Brkic said. Owned by Croatian businessman Ivica Todoric, Agrokor is almost as impor-

tant as tourism to Croatia, which emerged from a six-year recession in 2015 and is one of the European Union's poorest-performing economies. "A collapse of Agrokor would lead Croatia into recession, push it back into 2008," warned Vladimir Nisevic, editor-in-chief of the Poslovnidnevnik business newspaper.

Croatia's Chamber of Agriculture has urged the government to make suppliers' payments a priority issue, warning of the threat of farm closures and a "further exodus from rural areas". Faced with a company that may be too big to fail, Croatia's parliament on Thursday adopted an emergency law aimed at saving troubled giant firms like Agrokor and shielding the country's economy through a restructuring process. Opposition lawmakers argued however that the law would not protect employees and small suppliers but rather management. — AFP