

Gulf's massive expatriate workforce fears virus limbo

DOHA: Millions of migrant workers across the Gulf face uncertainty as host countries lock down, employers withhold wages or mull redundancies, and strict coronavirus containment measures lead to deportations and confinement. "We've been in lockdown for the last eight to 10 days, we don't know when it will end," said a 27-year-old Pakistani engineer in Qatar beginning a second week under mandatory quarantine. "The basic issue we are facing now is groceries. The government is providing us with food but only after some days - and little things only."

He is among tens of thousands of workers strictly confined to Doha's Industrial Area after dozens in the blue-collar district tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. Advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty warn that cramped accommodation and inadequate sanitation endanger migrant workers across the Gulf, who may not have access to healthcare. They also face salaries going unpaid and arbitrary dismissal or deportation - an outcome that could spell disaster for families at home dependent on their income.

'Already disadvantaged'

"Migrant workers in the Gulf are already disadvantaged (under) a labor governance system that gives employers excessive powers over migrant workers and drives their abuse and exploitation," HRW's Gulf researcher Hiba Zayadin told AFP.

"Gulf countries should go above and beyond in introducing measures to prevent the spread of the virus in migrant accommodations and migrant detention centers."

With the region so far reporting 3,200 cases of the disease, Amnesty said that workers "trapped in camps" are particularly vulnerable, enduring conditions that make social distancing impossible. Foreign workers in the oil-rich Gulf region, predominantly from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, account for around 10 percent of all migrants worldwide. Many who spoke to AFP say they now fear for their health and job security.

Saudis receive paid leave

Some laborers in Saudi Arabia, home to 10 million expat workers, complained that they were required by bosses to work while Saudis were permitted paid quarantine leave. One said he was told to accept unpaid leave if he felt unwell, but opted to continue working. "Many workers in the private sector are suffering due to the closure of most sectors, as many owners force the workers to sit in their homes without a salary," an Arab diplomat based in Riyadh told AFP. "And despite the kingdom's compensation to the private sector, the owners use it to cover their losses due to the closure without caring for the workers."

After Saudi Arabia, the UAE hosts the Gulf's second largest migrant labor force with 8.7 million, fol-

lowed by Kuwait with 2.8 million. In Kuwait, Um Sabrine, an Egyptian beauty salon manager, said she would not be paid because of the government's closure of non-essential businesses. While she plans to sue her employer, many in the region are reluctant to speak out for fear of reprisals. Others believe the health situation is worse in their home countries.

World Cup rolls on

Gas-rich Qatar's record on migrant labor has been under the spotlight since it won the right to host the 2022 World Cup, with seven new football stadiums as well as towering skyscrapers to be built by an army of foreign workers. Ninety percent of Qatar's 2.75 million people are expats. Many are from developing countries and working on projects linked to the tournament - stadium construction has continued even as other businesses have shuttered.

Rights groups have previously criticized labor practices in Qatar, which has responded with initiatives to enhance worker welfare. But the lockdown of the densely populated Industrial Area has drawn scrutiny. "They identified a ground-zero and it was very easy for them to shut it down quickly," said one Western diplomat. "Would they have done it if it had been somewhere in the Pearl? I don't know," she added, referring to an artificial island popular with wealthy expatriates. Qatari officials insisted last week's sealing of the area, now ringed by the police, was essential to save lives. They also say

they have flooded the area with medical resources and pledged to pay missed salaries.

'I'm scared'

The International Labor Organization's Doha office said several employers had transferred staff to more spacious lodgings over fears cramped conditions could incubate the virus, while others have improved hygiene. A Sri Lankan supermarket worker, 23, said his communal villa was sanitized and cleaned in response to COVID-19, but anxiety persisted. "I'm homesick - my mother keeps asking me to come back." One Turkish salesman, 49, told AFP he was self-isolating as a precaution and was on unpaid leave. "I'm scared to get infected," said the man who, like many Gulf expats, is ineligible for sick pay.

At least 20 Nepalese migrant laborers were deported by Qatar for ignoring containment rules. Nepalese officials told AFP, even though Kathmandu has sought to block returnees. The ILO questioned how long companies could continue paying workers as the crisis continues, chilling Gulf economies which have been blindsided by the plunge in oil prices. Mass redundancies, avoided so far, would do huge economic damage to countries sending labor to the region, said the head of the ILO's Qatar office, Houtan Homayounpour. "The impact is disastrous." — AFP



DUBAI: Men wait to cross a street on March 28, 2020 as the emirate tries to stem the spread of the COVID-19. — AFP

Govt mulls locking down expat...

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one million expats, a majority of them blue-collar workers, are residing. She said the lockdown has become necessary to resolve the problem of not knowing the source of the disease.

MP Khalil Al-Saleh said he called the ministers of interior and health and asked them to convince authorities to lock down some areas like Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, saying this has become inevitable because several workers have contracted the disease from unknown sources. A number of MPs urged the government to utilize the current period and adjust the demographic structure in the country, which is tilted in favor of expatriates.

Private schools continue...

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"We know that the IGCSE exams were canceled by Cambridge, so why are the schools forcing teachers to continue teaching live online? They have not told us when we will start in August and are just waiting for the ministry to resolve the fee uncertainty faced by many schools," explained a teacher working in a private British-curriculum school. None of the teachers and parents Kuwait Times spoke with wanted to be named for fear of repercussions from schools. School administrations approached by Kuwait Times did not respond to requests for interviews.

Some schools have cancelled the planned spring break - it's unclear with or without ministry approval - and are having teachers expand online learning. "The psychological impact on most of the teachers is dreadful. When the ministry announcement was made, the school had plans to put on more live Zoom teaching lessons on its timetable and increase the workload," the teacher noted.

The reason, teachers contend, that private schools are continuing with e-learning is that this will justify schools' requirement for the final installment of tuition fees. But it's unclear how effective or organized the e-learning is across all private schools, and also what e-learning will mean for students in the fall. Will they repeat everything they are doing now via e-learning? Or does continuation of e-learning mean they can complete the year in June and move on to the next grade? Parents want to know.

"Teachers are struggling mentally, and parents feel frustrated with the sheer madness of the amount of new material constantly sent to them of

The ministry of health yesterday announced 11 new coronavirus cases that include eight Indians, one Saudi and two Kuwaitis. The ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said the 11 new cases include a Kuwaiti who had travelled to the United Kingdom and a Saudi who had travelled to Saudi Arabia. Eight cases of contact infection were recorded - a Kuwaiti in contact with a case related to travel to France and Switzerland, seven Indians in contact with confirmed cases and an Indian whose case is under epidemiological investigation.

On Sunday, the ministry reported 20 cases that included nine Indians, three Bangladeshis and one Filipina, in addition to seven Kuwaitis. The new cases raise the total to 266, of whom 73 have recovered after the ministry announced five new recoveries yesterday. The spokesman said 194 cases are receiving treatment, 13 of whom are in the intensive care unit. As many as 910 people have been discharged from quarantine.

different subjects. They cannot cope with the pressure from school, but teachers are doing it out of fear of the management because the school has fired teachers unjustly before and is threatening teachers with non-renewal of contracts," another teacher told Kuwait Times.

There are parents who want e-learning to continue and are willing to pay the fees as well. But there are outstanding questions for these parents as well. If children continue e-learning, will they finish the school year in June as normal or will they have to repeat the last part of the year in the fall as the ministry has said?

Some private schools are abiding by the education ministry and Cabinet decisions. But now those decisions have been muddled by additional announcements from the education ministry. Last Sunday, the education ministry announced on its official Instagram account that the second stage of the operational plan was launched to activate e-learning at the ministry, which includes the new Kuwait educational portal that will allow teachers to provide lessons directly through virtual classes with various interactive tools such as interactive books and interactive videos. The application will be available on tablets and smartphones.

But Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi said during an interview with Al-Rai TV on March 23 that private schools must not count on e-learning in the present time because the ministry of education is committed to the decision of the Council of Ministers, which was clear on suspending studies at public and private schools, universities and educational institutions, including e-learning, until Aug 4, and any school that continues e-learning is going against the Cabinet's decision.

Regarding tuition fees in private schools, he said: "This matter is between the parents and the school, but I believe that private schools have completed about 60 percent of the academic year and they will complete the rest of the year in August, which is a fair and legal way to earn their fees."

No resting place for coronavirus dead in Iraq

BAGHDAD: For Saad Malik, losing his father to the novel coronavirus was only the beginning of his nightmare. For over a week, cemeteries across Iraq refused to allow the elderly man's burial. Fearing the respiratory illness could somehow spread from the corpses to nearby population centers, Iraqi religious authorities, tribes and townspeople have sent the bodies of COVID-19 victims back to hospital morgues, where they are piling up.

"We couldn't hold a funeral for him and haven't been able to bury his body, even though it's been more than a week since he died," Malik told AFP, his voice laced with bitterness. Armed men claiming to be tribal leaders threatened Malik, his family and his friends, saying they would set fire to his car if they tried to bury the body in their area. "Can you imagine that across this huge country Iraq, there aren't a few square meters to bury a small number of bodies?"

In Islam, a person must be buried as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. Cremation is strictly prohibited. Iraq has confirmed more than 500 COVID-19 cases and 42 deaths from the respiratory disease, but the real numbers are likely much higher as few of the country's 40 million people have been tested. Authorities have declared a nationwide lockdown until April 11, urging citizens to stay at home and adopt rigorous hygiene routines to forestall the spread of the virus.

'Where will we put bodies?'

But in some areas, local powers are getting even stricter. Northeast of the capital Baghdad this week, tribal figures prevented a team of health ministry officials from burying four bodies in a cemetery the state had specifically designated for COVID-19 victims. When the delegation tried to take the bodies to another burial ground southeast of Baghdad, dozens of local townspeople turned out in protest.

Ultimately, the bodies were returned to the morgue. One Iraqi living near Baghdad told AFP "we decided to block any burials in our area". "We panicked over (the health of) our children and families." According to the World Health Organization (WHO), which is leading the global response to the pandemic, coronavirus is transmitted through droplets and surface contact.

There is no scientific evidence yet that it could spread via corpses, according to Iraqi health ministry spokesman Seif Al-Badr. He said the government was taking all possible precautions when burying bodies, including wrapping them in bags, disinfecting them and placing them in special coffins. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the country's top Shiite cleric, has said those who lost their lives to the disease must be wrapped in three shrouds and insisted authorities facilitate burials.

But rejections of burials have continued, including in the two shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, where one of the world's largest cemeteries is located. An Iraqi medic in Najaf told AFP the health ministry had tried to intervene directly to convince Najaf authorities to allow burials of COVID-19 victims, to no avail. The medic, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said he had witnessed one widower beg authorities to release his wife's body. "Just give me the body and I'll bury her in my own home," the heartbroken husband had said. "This is the situation after just 40 deaths. What happens if it gets worse? Where will we put the bodies?" the medic asked.

Many in Iraq have been bracing themselves for a rise in cases in the weeks ahead, but the country's hospitals are ill-prepared to deal with large numbers. They have been ravaged by decades of conflict and have received little investment in recent years, leaving them woefully bereft of medicine and equipment. Doctors, too, have been threatened, kidnapped and even killed in recent years over ransoms or under pressure from relatives of patients.

According to the WHO, there are only 14 hospital beds in Iraq for every 10,000 people. By way of comparison, France - currently overwhelmed by the spreading virus - has 60 beds for every 10,000 people. To try to fill the gap, Iraqis are stepping up with inventions of their own. Medical engineer Moqtada Al-Zubaidi has created a hospital bed encased in plexiglass, which includes a respirator with oxygen tanks, an air conditioning unit, a bell to ring nurses and a flat-screen television.

"It's an invention with humanitarian purposes. We proposed the name 'the bed of life' because it provides security and reassurance to people who are sick," he said. Zubaidi is awaiting approval from the health ministry to produce more beds, which cost \$4,000 each. But for many fellow Iraqis disheartened by the rising death toll, such measures may be too little, too late. Salem Al-Shummary, Malik's cousin, had tried to help Malik bury his father and was left scarred by the experience. "We're not fazed by death anymore. We just have one dream: to bury our dead," he said. — AFP



BASRA: This picture taken on March 27, 2020 shows a view of a purpose-built sealed hospital bed built by a resident to isolate coronavirus patients. — AFP