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## In Dubai, an Outcry From Asians for Workplace Rights

By HASSAN M. FATTAH

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, March 25 — For Rajee Kumaran, this was the city of dreams.

Dubai's gleaming high rises, idyllic beaches and seemingly limitless opportunities glittered on the pages of brochures and in the stories told by laborers returning home to his native Kerala, India. But after five years here, surviving in squalid conditions and barely making ends meet on less than \$200 a month, Mr. Kumaran, 28, says his dream has long since faded.

"I thought this was the land of opportunity, but I was fooled," he said Thursday, as he stood with several other construction workers outside their work camp in the desert on the outskirts of the city.

When hundreds of workers angered by low salaries and mistreatment rioted Tuesday night at the site of what is to become the world's tallest skyscraper, not only were they expressing the growing frustration of Asian migrants here, they offered a glimpse of an increasingly organized labor force.

Far from the high-rise towers and luxury hotels emblematic of Dubai, the workers turning this swath of desert into a modern metropolis live in a Dickensian world of cramped labor camps, low pay and increasing desperation.

For years, workers like Mr. Kumaran have done whatever they could to get here, often paying thousands of dollars to unscrupulous recruiters for the chance to work at one of the hundreds of construction sites in the emirates.

Of the 1.5 million residents of Dubai, as many as a million are immigrants who have come here to work in some capacity, with the largest subgroup being construction workers, said Hadi Ghaemi, a researcher with Human Rights Watch who covers the United Arab Emirates, citing government statistics. A vast majority of the immigrants come from the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines.

With the cost of living rising, many have abandoned dreams of returning with a fortune. The construction workers' camps, in particular, have been set up ever deeper in the desert. That adds an hour or two just to get to the job site every morning, in addition to the workers' 12-hour shifts.

A growing number have resorted to suicide rather than return home with empty pockets: last year, 84 South Asians committed suicide in Dubai, according to the Indian Consulate here, up from 70 in 2004.

Mr. Kumaran, who earns 550 dirhams every month, or about \$150, as a laborer, sends home almost half his earnings and lives on the equivalent of roughly \$60 a month. That is barely enough to pay for food and cigarettes and using his cellphone from time to time. But he is not sure how he will repay the loan he took to get here.

"If I'd stayed in India and worked just as hard as I do now, I could have made the same money," he said. "And I wouldn't have needed to get a loan to come here."

Since last September, when 800 workers staged a protest march down a main highway in the heart of the city and set off a national debate about the treatment of foreign workers, laborers have held at least eight major strikes to demand their rights and get their pay, which is sometimes withheld.

But the mass action on Tuesday was the most significant of its kind. Hundreds of workers building the Burj Dubai skyscraper chased security guards and broke into offices, smashing computers, scattering files and wrecking cars and construction machines. When they returned to work the next day, demanding better pay and improved working conditions, thousands of laborers building an airport terminal across town also laid down their tools, demanding better conditions, too. The workers also halted work on Thursday, until a settlement was negotiated.

"It was a watershed moment in coordination and organization," Mr. Ghaemi said. "It started with increasing numbers of strikes, and has now evolved into very organized and coordinated activities. If these grievances are not addressed quickly by the government they are sure to begin hurting the economic growth of the country."

Those workers have few rights. Visa sponsors and employers typically confiscate their passports and residency permits when they sign on, restricting their freedom of movement and their ability to report abuse.

Most pay money to recruiters to find work here, a practice that the U.A.E. government has sought to stop. When they get here, few can leave the country without the permission of their employers, who can block them from working elsewhere in the country if they resign or are fired.

Unionizing is forbidden, too, and most workers have no recourse other than the Labor Ministry.

Denial of wages is the most common abuse of workers, as contracting companies typically wait to pay their workers until they themselves get paid. In the worst cases, workers have been denied wages for more than 10 months, only to lose the entire salary

when the contracting companies go bankrupt, leaving the men destitute and with few options.

The U.A.E.'s Ministry of Labor has tried to tackle the problem in recent months, making changes meant to allow workers to change employers more easily and imposing strict penalties on employers that do not pay their workers.

Workers can call a toll-free hot line to the ministry to lodge complaints, which are investigated. And ministry inspectors do travel to work camps to inspect them.

"We always support the workers and want to protect their rights, but we must protect employers' rights as well," said Ali al-Kaabi, the labor minister in the U.A.E. "As long as these three factors are in place, the workers have no reason to protest. If they have any problems or complaints they should speak with a supervisor, who should come to the ministry. Then if we don't act they have the right to protest."

But the sheer number of workers who have poured into the country over the past two years and inadequate staffing at the ministry have meant that many problems slip through, some officials and human rights workers say.

Only 80 government inspectors oversee about 200,000 companies and other establishments that employ migrant workers, Mr. Ghaemi said, citing government figures. The inspectors also look at labor camps: of the 36 camps inspected from May through December last year, the ministry ranked 27 well below government standards.

"There's such a boom and so many laborers required here that the government is bringing measures which are not entirely adequate," said B. S. Mubarak, labor and welfare consul at the Consulate General of India in Dubai. "Neither we nor the ministry can cope with the growing number of laborers and growing number of complaints."

As he boards a bus to his construction site every morning but Friday, Mr. Kumaran says he looks up at Dubai's skyline of gleaming high rises with a degree of sadness.

"I wish the rich people would realize who is building these towers," Mr. Kumaran said, flanked by his co-workers. "I wish they could come and see how sad this life is."

Mohammed Fadel Fahmy contributed reporting for this article.