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12.14 hrs.

Title: Regarding problems being faced by Indians working in Gulf countries.

SHRI RAMESH CHENNITHALA (MAVELIKARA): Sir, I call the attention of the Minister of External Affairs to the following matter of urgent public importance and request that he may make a statement thereon:

"The problems being faced by Indians going to and working in Gulf countries and steps taken by the Government in regard thereto."

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH): The problems generally faced by the Indian nationals living and working in the Gulf countries, particularly unskilled workers, relate mainly to non-payment of wages, long working hours, ill-treatment, denial of leave, cheating by recruiting agents, non-fulfilment of contractual obligations, poor working and living conditions, death and disability compensation, and transportation of dead bodies back to India. The semi-skilled and unskilled workers also suffer from a feeling of insecurity on account of diminishing demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and declining salary levels. There is also concern regarding rehabilitation and resettlement on their return to India in the event of premature termination of employment. Further, Gulf countries have introduced policies of localization and Arabisation which will affect the demand for Indian labour in the years to come. However, these policies are non-discriminatory and not directed at Indians specifically.

The Government of India has been taking the following measures to safeguard the interest of the intending emigrants as also of the workers who have already emigrated to Gulf and other countries for work.

All Indian Missions in the Gulf countries have full-fledged Labour Wings dealing with these problems.

It is being ensured that recruitment of workers for employment abroad is done only through the registered Recruiting Agents. When cases involving recruitment by illegal agents come to the notice of the Ministry, immediate action is taken to refer the matter to the police authorities for taking action under the provisions of the Emigration Act, 1983.

Employment documents in respect of all workers requiring emigration clearance are properly scrutinised in the offices of the Protector of Emigrants with a view to ensuring that the workers are sent abroad against genuine demands. It is also ensured that unskilled workers are allowed to emigrate only after the papers are attested by the Indian Missions abroad.

Immigration authorities have been advised through the Ministry of Home Affairs, to scrutinise the passports and other documents before allowing workers to emigrate.

As and when cases relating to harassment of workers, non-payment of salary etc. are brought to the notice of the Ministry or, our Embassies abroad, the concerned registered Recruiting Agents are advised to settle the grievances of the workers immediately. In the majority of cases, the registered Recruiting Agents see to it that the grievances of the workers are settled expeditiously. In cases where the agents do not act on the directions of the Protector General of Emigrants, their registration is suspended and further action is taken as required.

Foreign agencies which do not make the payment of salary in accordance with the agreement or fail to provide the basic minimum facilities to the workers, are included in "Prior Approval Category" (PAC) and any further recruitment for these agencies is stopped till such time as fresh positive recommendation is received from the Indian Mission abroad.

As can be seen from the above, the Government is fully cognisant of the problems being faced by Indians going to and working in Gulf countries and that the necessary steps have been taken by the Government in this regard.

SHRI RAMESH CHENNITHALA (MAVELIKARA): Sir, earlier the labour outflow from India was almost entirely through permanent emigration. In the mid-1970s, the oil boom came which changed the entire complexion of the emigration. The Indian labour – semi-skilled and unskilled – is going in a large number to Gulf countries. Due to the increase in the revenue, the developmental activities have escalated in the

Gulf region. If you look at the statistics, for the last five years, emigration for employment from India has come down drastically. In 1997, it was 4.16 lakh and in 2001, it is 2.79 lakh. This shows that a considerable decline in the employment opportunities is being witnessed in this area. The contribution of Indians to convert this desert into heaven is laudable. The mutual cooperation of the two countries have definitely helped in promoting peace, amity, and development in the entire Middle-East.

The UAE Government is going to change the existing labour law from January 2003. It has been widely reported in all the Malayali dailies in Kerala that unskilled and semi-skilled workers will be losing the job opportunities in Gulf countries. An attempt is being made to give more opportunities to the citizens of UAE and other Gulf countries. This is not only going to affect the unskilled and skilled workers but also the workers who are working at higher posts. This may be for avoiding over-dependence of their citizens on foreign countries. From next year onwards, Oman is going to reserve seven more Departments for the local citizens. The Saudi Arabia Government has already enforced restrictions on giving visas to the Indians. There is a determined effort to enforce restrictions in many areas and more rigorous checks are being employed before granting the visas. Saudi Arabia is one country where very strict laws are being enforced in regard to visa and a very few people of our country are getting visas to this country.

In the light of all these changing laws in UAE and the Middle-East countries, I would like to urge upon the Minister and the Ministry of External Affairs to take immediate steps to redress the grievances. I would like to know from the hon. Minister whether the Government of India, especially the Ministry of External Affairs, have regular interaction with the Missions abroad as also with the Governments of the Gulf region.

When some of us MPs get an opportunity to go abroad, we see how the Embassies are functioning there. In the case of Gulf Missions, they are dealing with thousands of people of the Indian origin. The Missions abroad are not properly manned and particularly the Labour Department in our Missions remains in dearth of staff. I would like to know whether the Minister will take adequate steps to give more number of officials for the proper functioning of the Missions, especially in the Gulf countries.

My next question is about creation of a consolidated fund in the Missions in Gulf countries so that the problems of the people of Indian origin can be attended to properly. When many cases are coming up, the Embassies feel helpless. They cannot do anything because they do not have any provision for spending money from their own budget. Will the Government contemplate to have a consolidated fund for helping the people of Indian origin who are suffering for various reasons in the Gulf countries? Will the Prime Minister as the Head of the Government and the Minister of External Affairs undertake friendly and goodwill tours or pay frequent visits to these Gulf countries and interact with the rulers of those States so that our trade relations can get a fillip, our bilateral relations can be strengthened and the Indian nationals working there will get more encouragement? It will also give more and more employment opportunities for the people in our country.

Our country is facing huge unemployment problem. Manpower is the only strength that we have. If the manpower restrictions are not removed, it will adversely affect the prospects of our country. So, it is the duty of the Central Government and in particular the duty of the External Affairs Minister to undertake frequent tours and goodwill missions to these Gulf countries, so that he can interact with those rulers and get more opportunities for our people to go abroad.

As regards rehabilitation and resettlement of the people who are coming back from the Gulf countries, this problem has to be attended to more seriously. The Kerala Government has established a department called NORKA with Shri M.M. Hassan as the Minister who has been given the entire charge of looking after the needs of the people who come back from the Gulf countries. Will the Government of India extend all possible help to the NORKA Department of the Kerala Government to assist these people for their rehabilitation and resettlement?

Lastly, I would like to urge upon the Minister through you, Sir, that urgent steps should be taken to avoid inordinate delay in issuing of passports and renewing of passports. Cases relating to emigration pending with the Protector-General of Emigrants will have to be disposed of without delay. Will the Government take necessary steps in this regard?

SHRI VARKALA RADHAKRISHNAN (CHIRAYINKIL): At least one member from every family is employed in the Gulf countries in my constituency.

SHRI KODIKUNNIL SURESH (ADOOR): So is the case in my constituency.

SHRI SURESH KURUP (KOTTAYAM): The same is true of my constituency also.

SHRI VARKALA RADHAKRISHNAN : This shows the magnitude of the problem. The net result is that if a death occurs in a family, the cremation will not take place the same day. It will have to be postponed to the next day or a day after because their relatives will have to come from the Gulf countries. This is the situation in Kerala. By saying all this, I just wanted to impress upon the Minister regarding the magnitude of the problem.

I would like to suggest certain rehabilitation measures that are very urgent. We all know that their number is on the decrease. People have started going in large numbers to US. Now they are being retrenched and their number is being reduced.

So, the major question is rehabilitation. For this purpose, both the State Government and the Central Government should take initiatives. In this respect, it may be worthwhile to mention that the immigration authorities are collecting Rs. 2000 from each and every employee who is proceeding abroad. By a rough estimate, I am given to understand that the amount has reached more than Rs. 1000 crore with the Central Government. This may form a nucleus rehabilitation fund which you may use. With the contribution from the State Government and the Central Government, the amount can be raised so that the people who are retrenched from the Gulf countries may find some betterment or rehabilitation in India.

They are earning foreign exchange. In one way, they are rendering service to the nation and this may be taken with gratitude. So, we should do all that is possible to help these poor workers who are working under unsuitable conditions in the Gulf countries. You may see that their blood is being vaporised while working in those countries. Poor people are working there. It is because of the foreign exchange they thrive on and not because the amount that they pay is big. It is not that. The position is that they are helped by the foreign exchange which they earn. Because of the foreign exchange, they would be earning something and that is being sent to India. Unfortunately, most of them spend their money for building purposes and so on.

The second aspect is, hitherto, the Indian Airlines and Air India were really exploiting these people. Very exorbitant fares were charged. Only recently, it has come down because other foreign services came into operation and the Indian Airlines and the Air India were forced to reduce their charges. But it has not been reduced to a large extent. Poor people are exploited by the Indian Airlines as well as Air India. So, this point must be taken into consideration.

There is another difficulty with regard to language. Among the Indians who are living there, at least, 75 per cent are Malayalees. As regards the language that is being used there, some staff members should be provided in all the Embassies there who can speak Malayalam as well. There is an apprehension among the Southern workers that they are being discriminated against because of the language difficulty. So, I would request the hon. Minister to see that some Malayalees or Keralites work there as staff members in the Middle East countries. That will do a lot because poor and skilled people are working there. Some of them do not know even to read properly and they know only Malayalam. In such cases, they should get proper attention and report.

My next point is about the dead bodies being transported to India. One or two deaths take place in every day and the dead bodies will be sent to our State. But the difficulty is, the sponsor will turn away. He will not meet the expenses. An immediate intervention by the embassy people can do a lot in this matter. The Indian Airlines do not bring them free of charges. Exorbitant charges are being levied. So, I would request the hon. Minister to make an arrangement so that the dead bodies are brought to India without delay.

Lastly, several poor workers are languishing in jails there due to import difficulties and technicalities or due to some criminal charges against them. They are being dealt with in the Middle-East countries. Until and unless the Embassy people take some prompt measures, they cannot be brought back to India. So, the languishing Malayalees in jails may be taken into consideration, and see that immediate steps are taken to bring them back to India and justice is done to them.

I again request the hon. Minister to be very prompt and active in the Indian embassies of the Middle-East countries, take into consideration that a lot of people are working there earning foreign exchange, do justice by rehabilitation, by arranging for bringing dead bodies to India and do all that is possible to help them in every way.

With these words, I conclude.

SHRI K. MURALEEDHARAN (CALICUT): Sir, in his reply at para 2(a), the hon. Minister has mentioned,

"All Indian Missions in the Gulf countries have full-fledged labour wings dealing with these problems. "

But actually the problem of female workers who are working in the homes of local people in Gulf countries, is that they are always cheated by their employers. They are not given salaries and they are not allowed to write letters to their own homes. They are not allowed to go outside. Then how can they make a complaint against these local people? That is the main problem being faced by the Indians, especially the ladies in Gulf countries.

Secondly, here you have mentioned about the problems related to your Ministry only. But most of the complaints that we receive, as Shri Varkala Radhakrishnan has mentioned, are regarding the high fares charged by the Air India and the Indian Airlines. We are getting so many complaints regarding high fares charged by the Air India and the Indian Airlines.

Mr. Speaker, as you are aware, most of the Keralities who are going to Gulf countries are from my constituency, Calicut. The airport at Calicut is monopolised by the Indian Airlines and the Air India. The airports at Cochin and Trivandrum are international ones, but the airport at Calicut is not an international one. It has only got international status. So, only the Air India and the Indian Airlines operate flights from Calicut airport. They are charging higher fares from the passengers. I request the hon. Minister to please reduce the fares. I am very much happy that the Civil Aviation Ministry is present here. You please do something to help the Indians in general and Keralites in particular who are working in Gulf countries.

Another important problem is, many applicants are waiting for Kuwait Compensation. That is a major issue, especially in Kerala. They have to fill up new forms prescribed by the United Nations Compensation Commission. I, therefore, request the Government that the United Nations Compensation Commission be asked to extend the period for filling up the applications for claiming Kuwait Compensation. These are some of the points that I wanted to raise. These points are very important. We hope to get a favourable reply from the Government. ...*(Interruptions)*

MR. SPEAKER: Hon. Members, Rule 197 is clear that only those Members who have given notice should be allowed to speak in the House. Some Members have, unfortunately, not given notice. Therefore, I will not be able to allow any Member to speak now. We must go according to the rules.

Yes, Mr. Minister may reply now.

...*(Interruptions)*

MR. SPEAKER: The issue is, no doubt, very important.

...*(Interruptions)*

MR. SPEAKER: Hon. Members, you can raise this issue under any other rule whenever it is possible, but not now.

...*(Interruptions)*

MR. SPEAKER: I would request the hon. Minister to take into consideration all the difficulties raised by the hon. Members.

...(Interruptions)

SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH: Sir, hon. Members may be allowed to raise any new points. There should not be any repetition. ...(Interruptions)

MR. SPEAKER: No, I am not permitting any Member to ask questions. Mr. Minister, you please go ahead with your reply.

...(Interruptions)

MR. SPEAKER: Members who want to raise this issue would write to the hon. Minister. That should also be considered by the Minister.

...(Interruptions)

SHRI A.C. JOS (TRICHUR): Sir, both the Indian Airlines and the Air India are operating flights to Gulf countries. The Air India was generous enough to bring dead bodies free of charge with one escort, whereas the Indian Airlines which has got the maximum service, is not extending that benefit. As a result, dead bodies are kept there for days together. ...(Interruptions)

SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH: I have got your point. ...(Interruptions)

SHRI A.C. JOS : The hon. Minister of Civil Aviation is present here. That is why I am saying this.

SHRI KODIKUNNIL SURESH : Sir, the UAE Government has banned Indian workers. ...(Interruptions)

श्री दिग्विजय सिंह : समापति महोदय, जैसा कि रमेश चेन्नितला जी ने अपने ध्यानाकर्षण प्रस्ताव के माध्यम से पूरे सदन और सरकार का ध्यान खींचने का प्रयास किया है और मुझे इस बात की प्रसन्नता है कि जो हमारे वर्कर्स हैं, जो गल्फ एरिया में काम करते हैं, मैं कहना चाहूंगा कि सबसे ज्यादा विदेशी मुद्रा जो इस देश में आती है तो इसी इलाके से आती है। यह बात अलग है कि ये गरीब किस्म के लोग हैं लेकिन इनकी सबसे ज्यादा दौलत इस देश को मिलती है। इसलिए जो हमारा विदेश मंत्रालय है, वह पूरी तरह से उन सारी बातों पर ध्यान रखता है जिनका जिक्र यहां किया गया है। रमेश जी का सबसे पहला सवाल था कि अब गल्फ में हमारे वर्कर्स कम जा रहे हैं और जिस रेगिस्तान को हमने स्वर्ग बनाया, उसमें हमारी भूमिका कम हो रही है। दरअसल जो काम हमें करना था, जो बड़े-बड़े प्रोजेक्ट्स वहां थे, जो जरूरत के सामान बनाने थे, उन कामों को पूरा किया जा रहा है और करीब-करीब वे काम पूरे हो गये हैं। इसीलिए अब यह बात सही है कि वर्कर्स का वहां जाना कम हो रहा है क्योंकि इसमें कोई दो राय नहीं है कि जो काम था, वह पूरा हो चुका है और कुछ मायने में जो मास्टर प्लान था, अगर मैं कहूं कि उसमें 70 से 80 फीसदी काम पूरा हो गया है, तो ऐसा कहना अतिशयोक्ति नहीं होगी। अब इतना कम हो गया है कि आपके लिए चिंता का विषय बन रहा है। दूसरा कारण यह बना है कि आजकल इन दोनों वहां जो अरबायेशन थ्योरी चल पड़ी कि अरब के लोगों को प्राथमिकता दें तो उसमें भी मैं एक बात कहना मुनासिब समझूंगा कि आज भी भारतीयों को पूरे इलाके में प्राथमिकता दी जाती है। अगर किसी देश में यह पूछा जाए कि कहां के लेबर को आप पहले बुलाएंगे तो भारतीय आज भी प्राथमिकता में हैं और आज भी तीन लाख से चार लाख लोग हर साल रोजगार पा रहे हैं। कुल इलाके में 35 लाख के आसपास भारतीय काम कर रहे हैं और

विदेश मंत्रालय की जिम्मेदारी है कि उनके हितों का पूरा ख्याल रखे और इस दिशा में जो कुछ बात उठाई गई है, हम उसके बारे में फिर कहना चाहेंगे कि आपकी चिंता थी और राधाकृष्ण जी ने चिंता जताई कि जो हमारे लेबर लोग जो विदेशों में मर जाते हैं, उनको यहां लाने में कठिनाई होती है। यहां एयर इंडिया और इंडियन एयरलाइन्स के मंत्री बैठे हुए हैं। हमने दस से पन्द्रह प्रतिशत तक का एयर इंडिया का भाड़ा घटाया है जिससे लोगों को आने में सहूलियत हो। डैड बॉडीज के लाने का इंतजाम जहां एम्पलायर तो करते ही हैं लेकिन असफल होते हैं तो एयर इंडिया और इंडियन एयरलाइन्स दोनों मिलकर बीस कि.ग्रा. वजन के साथ उनकी बॉडी को लाने का काम करती हैं।
Ⓜ(व्यवधान)

SHRI KODIKUNNIL SURESH : Mr. Minister, only the Air India is doing it. The Indian Airlines is not doing it. You may kindly ask your colleague about it....(Interruptions)

SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH: I am telling you. You are not aware of the fact. Even the Indian Airlines is doing it. Even if there is some reluctance on their part, the hon. Civil Aviation Minister, who is sitting behind me, will take care of it.

As far as the Government of India is concerned, I would like to say that both the Airlines are liable to bring back the body. I am telling you about it....(Interruptions)

SHRI SURESH KURUP : Sir, apart from this fact, inordinate delay occurs in bringing back the bodies because of the laws in those countries, especially in Saudi Arabia. I would like to place it on record that whenever we, the Members of Parliament, write to the External Affairs Ministry, prompt action is being taken. But the common people working in the Gulf countries are not able to approach our Embassies and Missions there. So, our Embassies and Missions should intervene immediately.

श्री दिग्विजय सिंह : बिल्कुल सही बात है। सरकार अपनी तरफ से पूरा प्रयास करती है और बिल्कुल ठीक कहा कि सऊदी अरब में कुछ कानून हैं जिनसे अड़चन आती है लेकिन मैं आपके माध्यम से सदन को बताना चाहूंगा कि भारत सरकार इसके लिए सतत प्रयास कर रही है कि इस कानून को कैसे ज्यादा से ज्यादा आसान बनाया जाए जिससे डैड बॉडीज को लाने में सहूलियत हो। मुरलीधरन साहब ने मेड स वर्नेट्स

के बारे में बात कही।Ⓜ(व्यवधान)

SHRI E. AHAMED (MANJERI): Sir, I would like to make a point here.

SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH: I cannot yield all the time to you. Let me complete it. Then I will yield to you.

SHRI E. AHAMED : In a country like Saudi Arabia, more than 1.3 million Indians are working....(Interruptions)

SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH: You are lessening their number. It is 1.4 million people who are working there. Please do not underestimate it.

SHRI E. AHAMED : All right, I say it is 1.5 million people who are working there.

We have only two Missions there, one in Jeddah and another in Riyadh. But in Dama and other places there is no Indian Mission. It is very difficult for Indians living in those places to approach our Missions. So, will the Government open more Indian Missions there? ...(Interruptions)

श्री दिग्विजय सिंह : महोदय, श्री मुरलीधरन जी ने मेड सर्वेनेट्स के बारे में कहा है, वहां के कानूनों में ऐसा प्रावधान है, जिसकी वजह से काफी परेशानी होती है। मैं आपसे इतना कहना चाहूंगा कि जो न्यू रिक्लूटमेंट मेड सर्वेनेट्स की हो रही है, उसमें भारत सरकार बहुत गम्भीरता से मोनिटरिंग कर रही है। अभी दस हजार मेड सर्वेनेट्स जो एम्बेसीज के माध्यम से रिक्लूट हुए हैं, उनके बारे में हमारे पास कोई कम्प्लेंट नहीं आई है। अगर माननीय सदस्यों को इसकी कोई सूचना मिली हो, तो जरूर हमारे मिशन या मंत्रालय को बतायें, ताकि हमारा मंत्रालय उस पर कार्रवाई कर सके।

श्री रमेश चेन्नितला जी ने एक सवाल उठाते हुए कहा था कि हमारे प्रधान मंत्री, मंत्री या बड़े लोग वहां जायें, जिससे हमारा तालमेल बना रहे। आप जानते हैं कि भारत की विदेश नीति में अरब देशों का महत्वपूर्ण स्थान है। हमारी विदेश नीति में प्रमुख स्थान है और उसी के हिसाब से हमारी प्राथमिकता रहती है कि हमारे राष्ट्रपति महोदय, प्रधान मंत्रीजी या विदेश मंत्री या अन्य दूसरे गण्यमान्य व्यक्ति वहां जायें और उनके प्रतिनिधि यहां आयें। यह सिलसिला लगातार जारी है और आगे भी जारी रहेगा। श्री राधाकृष्णन जी ने एक सवाल यह भी किया था कि इन देशों में जो मलयाली लोग हैं, उनके लिए एम्बेसीज में मलयाली स्टाफ हो, ताकि उनको बोलचाल में सहूलियत हो। यह अच्छा सुझाव है और मैं इस सुझाव का हमेशा आदर करूंगा तथा इसको ध्यान में रखूंगा।

SHRI E.M. SUDARSANA NATCHIAPPAN (SIVAGANGA): Mr. Speaker, Sir, will the hon. Minister include Tamil-speaking staff also in Indian Missions there because a lot of Tamilians are also living in those countries?

श्री दिग्विजय सिंह : जिन माननीय सदस्य ने सवाल उठाया है, मैं उन्हीं का जवाब दे रहा हूँ। मलयाली, तमिल और उर्दू - सभी अपनी भाषा पायें हैं। उन्होंने एक सुझाव दिया है, इस सुझाव का पूरा-पूरा ख्याल रखेंगे। श्री रमेश चेन्नितला जी ने वैलफेयर फण्ड बनाने के बारे में सवाल उठाया है। मैं बताना चाहता हूँ कि वैलफेयर फण्ड बनाने के लिए भारत सरकार विचार कर रही है। विचार ही नहीं कर रही है, उस पर बहुत गम्भीरता से काम शुरू किया है। हमारे आठ कॉन्सुलर्स वहां हैं। उन्होंने कान्फ्रेंस करके एक प्रस्ताव भेजा है कि किस तरह से वैलफेयर फण्ड

बनाया जाए या किस तरह से उनके हितों में काम किया जाए। कैबिनेट के पास वह प्रस्ताव है। जैसे ही वह प्रस्ताव पास होगा, उस फन्ड को बनायेंगे और पूरा-पूरा ख्याल रखेंगे कि भारतीय श्रमिकों के साथ बदइन्तजामी या बेइन्साफी न हो।

SHRI A.C. JOS : Mr. Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has not said anything about the facilities provided by Indian Airlines. ...(*Interruptions*)

MR. SPEAKER: The issue is over. Please take your seat.

SHRI A.C. JOS : Sir, Air India provides facilities to bring back the dead bodies to India, but Indian Airlines is not providing the same. Will the hon. Minister say something on this aspect?

SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH: Those facilities will be given by Indian Airlines also.
