

Bus collision kills 22 migrant workers in United Arab Emirates

By Dylan Lubao
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Twenty-two migrant workers were killed last week on the outskirts of the United Arab Emirates city of Al Ain after a construction truck swerved into a bus that was ferrying them to work. Another 24 were injured in what is being called the UAE's deadliest road crash. Many of the victims were crushed by tons of sand and cement after the truck overturned and pinned the bus underneath it.

The accident occurred along a highway regularly used by heavy vehicles. The highway lacks a central divider against oncoming traffic, and lane markings are rare. The UAE has one of the highest traffic mortality rates in the world.

Among the dead were 20 Bangladeshi contract workers, along with one Indian and an Egyptian. Commenting on the tragedy, Bangladeshi ambassador Nazmul Quanine stated: "We are unfortunately at the receiving end and not at the decision-making end. It is for the host companies to look into the way workers are taken to the work site."

Such a cynical statement reveals the callous official disregard for the millions of exploited workers forced to toil in distant lands, regarded by their employers as little more than chattels. The complicity of the Bangladeshi government in this tragedy is illustrated by the ease with which they sell these workers to the lowest bidder on the global labour market.

Over four million Bangladeshis work abroad, and their total remittances of \$US13 billion in 2012 comprised 11 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Stifling economic conditions in the South Asian country, where the minimum monthly wage is \$36, force many desperate men and women to seek work overseas, chiefly in the oil-rich countries of the Middle East. They stand to earn between \$175 and \$220 per month performing unskilled or semi-skilled

labour.

The Bangladeshi government, dominated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, presides over an economy that is chiefly distinguished by its subservience to foreign capital. Bangladesh is a source of cheap labour for international clothing corporations such as Wal-Mart and Sears. It is the world's second leading exporter of garments after China.

Draconian legislation and paramilitary death squads suppress any form of workers' protest, and workplace safety laws are routinely flouted. Late last year, 112 textile workers were killed in a factory fire in the capital of Dhaka because their employers had locked them into a building lacking essential fire safety precautions.

Foreign remittances keep the national economy afloat. To this end, the government openly advocates the expansion of its overseas workforce. According to Finance Minister Abdul Maal Abdul Muhith: "Some 1.8 million new workers join the labour market every year and of them 500,000 go abroad. I expect the manpower export to reach 1 million in the next five years, from the existing 500,000."

In other words, the government's solution to the desperate situation faced by Bangladeshi workers is to separate them from their families and send them overseas to perform hazardous work for poverty wages. This sentiment is underscored by the slogan used for the 2012 Migrant's Day celebrations: "We will go abroad by abiding by the law, building our country with foreign money."

Workers are exploited from the onset of their journey. Most are charged illegal recruitment fees to obtain work visas in the host country. These fees can exceed \$3,000, forcing many workers to borrow at exorbitant rates from loan sharks. In many cases,

promises of a decent wage are dashed soon after they enter the host country, where it is revealed to them that their initial work contracts are null and void. This is a common experience for workers from South and Southeast Asia.

In the UAE, migrant workers are hired under a temporary labour system known as kafala. They are sponsored by a UAE employer and must work for them for the duration of their contract. The confiscation of workers' passports is almost universal, effectively holding them hostage despite harsh working and living conditions. Most have no access to health insurance. Migrant workers outnumber Emiratis five to one but have no path to citizenship and, by extension, representation in government. Most Emiratis are assured of jobs in the state apparatus, boosting their GDP per capita to \$37,000.

Most migrant workers toil as manual labourers in the construction of the UAE's dazzling skyscrapers and mansions. Twelve-hour workdays in soaring temperatures of up to 40 degrees Celsius blur into a brutal daily routine. Employers often delay payment of wages or deny wages altogether.

In comparison to the outward splendor of Dubai or Abu Dhabi, living conditions for migrant workers are squalid. Crammed six to a room that is the size of a typical hotel bathroom, workers put up bunk beds if there is space. Others sleep on rugged mats on the cement floor. These workers' tenements have been compared to prison camps.

Workers have virtually no recourse. Workers organisations are effectively barred, and employers are given free rein to terminate the visas of workers who prove too troublesome—that is, those who choose to demand that their contracts be honoured. Although the confiscation of workers' passports is illegal in both UAE and international law, employers use the excuse that in order to terminate a worker's visa, they require the worker's passport. This constitutes a system of modern slavery in all but name.

Workers' collective actions are crushed with ferocity. In January 2011, about 3,000 workers at UAE construction company Arabtec went on strike for a rise in monthly wages from 650 dirham (\$175) to 1,220 dirham (\$330). Many strikers also demanded back pay that had been withheld for months. Because strikes are illegal in the UAE, 71 strike leaders from Bangladesh

were rounded up and deported. Arabtec reported profits of \$70 million in 2011.

Nearing hopelessness, many workers choose to flee employers who withhold their wages. Forced to work illegally, these men and women lack the money and documents to return home. They cannot send remittances without their passports. Lacking any proof of identity, they wait months for their country's embassies to issue exit papers. In the meantime, they must work illicitly under much more exploitative conditions than those they fled.

Over 300,000 immigrants live illegally in the UAE. Passing through their tent cities, one sees the faces of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Thai, Indonesian, Sri Lankan and Filipino men and women, weathered by the unforgiving conditions they have found themselves in. They eke out an existence until they can afford to return home, if ever. The suicide rate among the migrant worker population, 6.3 out of every 100,000 people, is seven times higher than the rate among Emiratis.

The government periodically offers an amnesty, giving workers a choice: regularise your visas and pay the penalties, or waive the penalties and buy a plane ticket home. The most recent amnesty period occurred last December and ended on February 4. Over 300,000 migrants chose to leave the UAE under this provision in 2007. This deceitful government manoeuvre only serves to continue the cycle of exploitation, squeezing ever more out of current migrants and funneling in new hopefuls from exploited countries.

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