

## Indian workers in US shipyard: hear out agency, judge tells government

The Delhi High Court has asked the government to hear out the recruitment agency that sent Indian workers to a US shipyard before taking further action. The workers walked out alleging inhuman conditions and promises not being kept, after the government suspended the agency's licence.

Mumbai-based Dewan Consultants Pvt Ltd (DCPL) was in the news when 120 Indian workers at a shipyard in Mississippi alleged that they were being treated inhumanly and were kept there without even proper food.

The government also filed a case of cheating against the firm, which had recruited the workers, though the authorities did not accuse it of human trafficking, as the workers had alleged.

The firm went to court against the suspension of the work permit, saying that the government had refused to listen to its side of the story. Delhi High Court judge Rekha Sharma said last week that the government should listen to the firm before taking further action.

In 2006, Signal International, a marine fabrication company, had reportedly recruited 590 Indian workers through DCPL. The workers had gone to the US on H2B guest worker visas valid for 10 months.

The workers walked out of the Mississippi and Texas shipyards in March, supported by local civil rights and worker rights groups. About 100 of them marched to Washington demanding action against the US company and asked for permanent residency as assured by their recruiters (DCPL) to whom they allegedly paid \$20,000 each.

DCPL had been issued registration certificate under the Immigration Act, 1983, permitting it to recruit workers for overseas employment.

On March 10, DCPL was issued a show cause notice and its registration certificate was suspended for a period of 30 days. The agency was asked to reply within 15 days as to why its licence should not be suspended indefinitely.

The petitioner told the court that an English daily had, on the basis of just the show cause notice, carried a report about Indian workers recruited by them being treated badly in the US.

DCPL said that the charges were baseless and that the government had suspended their registration certificate without verifying facts, putting it out of business.

Judge Sharma, while disposing of the petition, said: 'The registration certificate of the petitioner is under suspension since March 10, 2008 and on account thereof, petitioner is unable to operate as a recruiting agent. I direct the respondents to dispose of the inquiry pending against it within one month.'

The Indian workers have also filed a complaint in the district court of Louisiana in March. Apart from the Louisiana hearings, the US Department of Justice also launched an investigation into the case in March shortly after the workers walked away from their jobs.

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