

OPIRA: a helping hand for Indian workers abroad

The families of three Tamil fishermen in a jail in Saudi Arabia have appealed to Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi to help them get their dear ones released.

The three were working for a Saudi company and were arrested in 2005 and given 15 years in jail each for possessing contraband. Their families claim that fishermen from Iran had given the Indian fishermen some 'bags' and requested them to hand it over to their relatives in Saudi Arabia. The bags contained contraband, the Saudi police said.

Incident after incident reveals how workers from India are extremely gullible, are exploited and sometimes end up in jail.

With the goal of bringing to light the many untold stories of Indians abroad, a rights group has now set up in [Chennai](#) an Organisation for Protecting Indians' Rights Abroad (OPIRA).

Agni Subramaniam of Manitham, the rights body under which Opira functions, says: 'The human rights of migrants deserve greater attention. Migrants often find themselves without protection from their own country and in the country where they are' and OPIRA was set up with the dedicated purpose of helping such people.

Every case is different and every country's law is different.

Askar Miyan Ayyathambi Aliyar, 31, from Ramanathapuram district is a death row convict in a Chinese prison, accused of smuggling heroin. He was caught by customs Feb 21, 2007, while travelling from Macao to Gongbei.

'My brother Askar Miyan was duped by his friend Saleem,' Rajamohammed told IANS here. 'He is innocent.'

Askar's father is an ex-serviceman from the army. According to Rajamohammed, Askar worked in Thailand as a cook. He was told by Saleem, alias Hussain, that he could work in London if he could pay Rs.300,000. The family raised the money and paid the agent in Ramanathapuram.

Askar was then moved to Cambodia and told if he entered China, he could easily get a visa to Britain there. On entering China, he was arrested. It was only when the family received a letter in Chinese that they discovered their son was in jail.

In the meantime, in his confession to the jail authorities, Askar had revealed how the agent Saleem had told him to come to China.

The Chinese caught Saleem (Hussain) when he arrived at Guan Zhou airport in March 2007. He had a record of repeated entry into China since November 2006.

Both men were accused of drug smuggling and awarded the death sentence by the Zhuohai middle law court in August 2007.

Askar's family has now approached OPIRA for assistance in gaining consular support. 'We pray to

the Indian government to help save Askar's life,' a distraught family member told IANS.

Says Subramaniam: 'Poor migrants are often cheated, exploited. The majority of migrants are unskilled or semi-skilled, with little or no education. In a crisis situation, they find it difficult to defend their rights.'

Last week the Tamilnadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam appealed to the chief minister to get back 10 people taken from Thiruvarur district to Kuwait to work as drivers for the Al-Hassar Car rental company and who are allegedly being held as bonded labour.

Then there is the case of 16-year-old Joseph and his brother Ignatius, who had gone fishing and were arrested by the Sri Lankan navy last month, which IANS had reported. Eleven fishermen's federations have now appealed to OPIRA to get the Indian fishermen released. The state government has now taken up the case.

There are also the cases of 43 Indians in Lankan jails, including a 79-year-old man, which too IANS had reported.

OPIRA is also helping the 500-odd Indian workers who sat on a 29-day hunger strike in Washington DC seeking justice from a Mississippi company, the Signal International, which brought them to the US to work. Nearly 210 of these men are from Tamil Nadu, the others being from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Radhika Kumar, wife of Muthu Kumar, one of the protesting Indian workers, told IANS that the family had paid Rs.1.6 million to an agent for her husband Muthu and his brother to go to work in the US.

OPIRA's source of information on victims is through the media, directly from families, through NGOs abroad, embassies or through submissions on the website www.opira.org, and at abroadindian@gmail.com and manitham@gmail.com.

It hopes to also garner support from India's external affairs ministry and the foreign consulates, aimed at resolving such labour issues.

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