

We are victims, say three 'missing' Indians in New Zealand

Three of the 39 Indians, who disappeared in New Zealand en route to attend the Catholic Church's week-long World Youth Day (WYD) festivities in Sydney, have said they were duped by their travel agent and are not trying to cheat the immigration system.

'We are victims ourselves and we are not trying to cheat the system,' the three men, aged between 32 and 34, have told Joy Reid of the Radio New Zealand soon after meeting immigration officials along with two representatives of the Indian community in Auckland Thursday afternoon.

Hailing from Bulath village in Jalandhar district, the men told Radio New Zealand that they are genuine Catholics and had come with a group of 12 others from their village, eight of whom have gone to Australia.

The three men - a carpenter, an electrician and a shop assistant - told the radio station that they had borrowed from moneylenders in order to pay the NZ\$17,000 fee to the agent, whom they met in their village.

The trio, who do not know the other 36 missing Indians, told Radio New Zealand that they did not liaise with the Catholic church in India but the agent probably did.

The three men had been planning their move to New Zealand for over a year and the agent had told them they could live in New Zealand 'forever'.

They admitted to the radio station that the agent might have forged some documents as it was not until the men boarded the flight in India that they realised they were supposed to be bound for WYD in Sydney.

According to a statement issued by the Department of Labour: 'The meeting discussed the basis on which they came here and the officials reminded them of their permit conditions. The Department will not comment on what it learned from the meeting, as that would prejudice ongoing enquiries.

'The Indians remain in the care of the person who has been looking after them since they went missing from their pilgrim group and who brought them to the meeting,' the statement added.

The 39, including some Muslims and Hindus masquerading as Catholics, were part of a group of 220 Indians who were billeted with Catholic families in Auckland on their way to WYD celebrations in Sydney to be led by Pope Benedict XVI.

The New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils' president Pancha Narayanan told Radio New Zealand that Bollywood movies portray New Zealand as an easy destination to migrate.

However, the Department of Labour, which is in charge of immigration, has rejected claims that New Zealand is a soft target for immigration scams.

Immigration Service head Andrew Annakin told the radio station that New Zealand has advanced levels of security and is vigilant about trafficking.

Meanwhile, an embarrassed chairman of the World Youth Day committee in Auckland, Maurice Boland, has also appealed to the missing Indians to immediately contact immigration authorities. He said there was 'a lot of hurt' among the families who had agreed to host them.

Some of those who are missing absconded from Auckland International Airport on arrival in New Zealand in early July, while others absconded from their billets, all but one leaving their luggage there, according to the Department of Labour.

Representatives of the Catholic Church, which sponsored their transit through New Zealand, have handed the passports of 38 Indians to immigration officials. One person is said to be in possession of his own passport.

The absconding Indians, aged 17 to 35 and mainly from Jalandhar district in Punjab, have valid visitor visa to remain legally in New Zealand until Aug 5 or 6 and the immigration head has appealed to them to come forward and meet the immigration authorities to resolve the situation.

Neena Bhandari (© IANS / India eNews)