

# Indian workers meet Sen, demand CBI probe

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After marching for hundreds of miles to protest "slave-like treatment" at a Mississippi shipyard, nearly 100 Indians, who claim they were tricked into coming to the US, met Indian envoy Ronen Sen and demanded a CBI probe into the alleged human trafficking by recruiters and steps to prevent abuse of workers under H2B visa programme.

The embassy and the Indian government will go the extra mile in taking care of the workers' safety, security and dignity, Sen told workers who reached the Indian embassy carrying placards and shouting slogans after their 1,500-km "journey for justice" that began in New Orleans on March 18.

The Indian ambassador met the workers, who had quit Signal International plant in Pascagula in Mississippi on March 6 alleging they were being forced to live and work under inhuman conditions, for over three hours patiently listening to their concerns and demands.

He, however, reminded them that they cannot breach established diplomatic protocol by directly interceding with such agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Immigration and Customs Services or the Department of Justice.

The workers who narrated their experiences to Sen, demanded an investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation into the case.

"I will convey this request," Sen said. The workers, however, said they needed more than symbolic assurance. "What we need is action, not just symbolic assurances," said R Pazhambalakode.

Signal, meanwhile, sought to put the blame on recruiters, saying it had fired Global Resources after it learnt that it had deceived workers by demanding highly excessive fees and making false promises about green card.

"Both Signal and our employees were misled. We are going to stand by our workers and do what we can to help them get justice. The recruiters' abuses cannot be tolerated," Signal International President and CEO Richard Marler said.

Signal will also pursue claims against Global Resources, its principal Michael Pol, other recruiters, and immigration attorney Malvern Burnett for charging the temporary workers excessive fees and making false promises about the green card process," a company statement said.

The NGO groups and their officials representing the 100 Indian workers have said that a class action law suit has been filed in New Orleans focusing on anti-racketeering against Signal International, the American and Indian recruiters. The Indians, who began the protest march to draw attention to their plight, sought embassy's intervention on the issue of their alleged surveillance by immigration authorities.

"We will not directly contact the US Immigration or Customs but we have already sensitised. We primarily deal with the State Department... We do not intend to get in touch with the Immigration or the Department of Justice," Sen said, adding "I will do what is in the interests of the citizens of India".

"We do not dictate and we do not give ultimatums. That is the way we operate," he said when repeatedly asked by the organisers if he can come up with a specific timeline to address the grievances of the workers.

"We can take certain action in our country... But we cannot give any timeline to US authorities on how to go about it," Sen said in response to a question.

The top Indian diplomat assured workers emphatically that there will be no "retaliation" against them by the India government and that he will convey "very faithfully" their concerns to authorities in New Delhi.