

Date: April 25, 2008

To: External Affairs Minister

Regarding: International Labour Trafficking from India to US

Hundreds of guest workers from India have been working and living in slave-like conditions at a shipyard in Pascagoula Mississippi owned by the company Signal International. Signal is one of the employers that, after Katrina, has used the United States' "guestworker" visa program (H-2B) to import cheap labour. About 600 workers were recruited, more than half from Kerala. They paid from \$15,000 to \$20,000 to Indian and American recruiters who defrauded them with promises of green cards and permanent residency in the United States. They sold their homes and went into debt.

At Signal, they were forced to live in company trailers, 24 men packed into each, isolated from the world. For this, the company took \$1,050 a month from their paychecks. Their visas prevented them from working for any other company and left the constant threat of deportation. Some of the workers attempted to organize for their rights. In response, the company sent armed guards into the camp while they slept and took the organizers away at gunpoint. They were locked in a room and told they would be deported. In desperation, one of them attempted suicide by slitting his wrist.

On March 10, 100 workers decided to leave the camps and surrender themselves to the US government, as victims of trafficking. According to the workers, the Indian Ambassador declined to meet with them despite their repeated requests. The workers (who have formed the organization Indian Workers' Congress) did a satyagraha march from New Orleans in the South to Washington DC in the North to protest the lack of response from the Ambassador. They met with a growing network of supporters and allies and received national media coverage in the US and in India. The US Department of Justice has since opened an official investigation into the workers' charges of human trafficking, and the workers have filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the traffickers.

On March 31st, nearly 100 Indian human trafficking survivors had a meeting with Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen, along with over a dozen of the workers' advocates and major international news media. The Indian Workers Congress asked Ambassador Sen to put pressure on the US Department of State to restrict travel to India for Signal's US recruiters, as well as pressure on the US government to halt any expansion of the guest worker program until both governments have adopted an agreement that reflects the interests of workers, as well as companies and recruiters. The workers asked the Ambassador on whether he would pressure US agencies to prosecute the company and recruiters that trafficked the workers, jump-start US-Indian talks about the abuse of Indian nationals under the US federal guest worker program, and protect the workers and their families from retaliation for their actions. Sen refused to advocate for the workers with US Department of Justice and other agencies, claiming that protocol forbade him from doing so.

In India, the workers' families met with the Kerala Chief Minister and with State Minister for External Affairs, Mr. E. Ahmed. Mr. Ahmed said that the Minister for Overseas Affairs, Mr. Vayalar Ravi, has to take primary responsibility. Family members have tried to physically meet with Mr. Ravi, without success. Mr. Ravi has also refused to meet with supporters of Indian Workers Congress in Delhi.

Workers are living in fear in the US, without legal status and face imminent homelessness and starvation. Family members in India live in fear and desperation, worried about their relatives in the US and themselves facing threatening calls from the Indian recruiters.

We respectfully ask you to ensure that the workers' and the families' misery does not unaddressed by its own government.

Demands of Indian Workers Congress and their families:

1. Cancellation/suspension by the Government of India, of visas for the concerned US recruiters, till there is a system by which they are required to observe Indian and US labour laws and are accountable to the Indian judicial system and government.
2. Government of India impress upon the Department of Justice in the US to grant temporary visas with work permit to the Indian workers in the US so that they can fight their case from there, legally.
3. Government of India communicate in writing to the US Department of State that they are seriously concerned for the prosecution of Signal and US recruiters through due process of law, and intends to monitor the prosecution to ensure effective justice.
4. Ensure safety of family members from threatening recruiters.