

May 15, 2008

Indian Guest Workers Solidarity Congress  
c/o Society for Labour and Development  
5L, Shahpur Jat  
New Delhi 110049

Mr. Vayalar Ravi  
Minister for Overseas Affairs  
New Delhi

Respected Mr. Ravi,

We represent an international solidarity effort in support of Indian guest workers, recruited to work for Signal in the US. We wish to draw your attention to the pathetic condition of the Indian workers and we wish to inform you about the current situation.

### **History of the situation**

550 welders and pipe-fitters were fraudulently recruited to go from India to US to work for Signal, with the promise they would receive permanent legal status in the U.S. for them and their families. But instead they were given "guest worker" visas and charged \$20,000. Their working and living conditions in the Gulf Coast amounted to modern day human slavery. On March 6, 120 workers broke the human trafficking chain, escaped Signal's labor camps, reported the company and its recruiters as human traffickers, and made a satyagraha from New Orleans to Washington, DC, to seek the support of Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen. When Ambassador Sen offered only symbolic reassurances, the workers decided to launch a hunger strike to demand the Indian government press the US government for a Congressional investigation and the right for the workers to remain safely in the US during an ongoing Department of Justice investigation into the case.

### **Present scenario**

The six workers who began the water-only hunger strike on May 14, Wednesday are among the recruited 500 Indian workers. "The Indian government needs to show the kind of courage with the US that it showed in labor talks with Malaysia and Bahrain," said hunger striker Sony Sulekha. "If we could sit down and talk with US Congressmen, we believe our leaders can too."

"We know the US is a powerful country, and we know that Signal is a powerful company. That is why we are asking the Indian government to support us as we stand here with our lives shattered," said hunger striker Muruganantham Kandhasami. "Until we get all three demands, we are standing here to strike until the end."

However, the Indian Embassy turned away a delegation of workers on Wednesday, including two of the hunger strikers, who attempted to deliver a statement of the hunger strike's goals. The workers are demanding that Indian parliamentarians press their US counterparts for a Congressional investigation into abuses in the US guest worker visa

program, and that the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Overseas Indian Affairs press the US State Department to secure the workers' right to participate in a human trafficking investigation into Signal and its US and Indian recruiters.

The workers are seeking Continued Presence under the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act so that they can participate in an ongoing investigation into their case by the Department of Justice.

"We understand that the US is a powerful country, and that the Indian government might be scared," said Muruganatham Kandhasami, one of more than 500 Indian guest workers who were held as bonded laborers by marine construction company Signal International. "But we overcame our fear and escaped from Signal's labor camps, so the Indian government can overcome its fears too."

"This hunger strike is a last resort," said Saket Soni, a worker's advocate who directs the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. "Ambassador Ronen Sen offered the workers only symbolic reassurances and apologies for protocol. Now they are risking their lives in the hope that the Indian government will find the courage to pressure the US government to grant them dignity, and protect future workers."

We are dismayed at the lack of support from the Indian government. We are expecting an active role from your office to support the workers, who are fighting for basic human rights. We know that your office is the sole authority to intervene in this matter and produce better results. We are expecting pressure from your office for the following demands.

- Continued presence for the workers, as authorized by the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 so that they may safely participate in a the federal government's anti-trafficking investigation.
- Congressional hearing in the US on Signal and the pitfalls of H-2B visas
- Indian government take specific, recognisable action vis-à-vis the US government

The workers are the citizens of India. We expect your office, the Indian Ambassador and the Indian government to protect its own citizens. We would like to discuss with you the actions that the Indian government can take in this situation.

Sincerely,

Rajiv Agarwal, Advocate and Trustee of Society for Labour and Development

Anannya Bhattacharjee, International Organizer of Jobs with Justice US-India, and Trustee for Society for Labour and Development

Arathi PM, Campaign Coordinator for Society for Labour and Development