

The foul treatment of Kuwait's cleaners

By Raymond Barrett

The plight of menial labourers in Kuwait is a epic tragedy well known to most newspaper readers. These impoverished expatriate workers all share a common story: they often aren't paid their salaries, live in substandard housing and may even be physically abused by their employers or the authorities. The newspapers decry the inhumane treatment of these labourers as 'a national disgrace that people exist in such conditions.' Yet little is done to right the wrongs and change these labourers' situation.

Last Sunday, the problem that had been simmering in the background for years boiled over and took on a life of its own. Around seven hundred Bangladeshi cleaners stormed the Bangladesh embassy in Kuwait, smashing windows and ripping posters from

I met one, Abdul Kalam (not his real name) recently. He asked not to be identified by name, as he feared that he would lose his job if his employers found out he had been talking about his working conditions.

A Bangladeshi in his 20's working as a cleaner for almost two years, Abdul Kalam's story is the story of many of his countrymen. As we talked, I asked him why he had decided to come to Kuwait. "It was my father, I am the only son," he said. He then explained how his father, a small farmer, had sold some of his land outside of Dhaka to raise the KD650 needed to arrange the flight, visa and job in Kuwait.

"The man in my country told me KD 50 salary, but I get only KD20," he said. He said that his plan was to first pay back his father and then earn enough to return home with enough money to marry and set up a home. "Two



the walls, breaking furniture and even injuring two of their compatriots in a riot of anger and frustration.

Almost everyone in Kuwait has an opinion on the plight of these men. They are highly visible, their garish uniforms are clearly visible in almost every work place in the country, emptying waste baskets, mopping floors and carrying out other menial tasks.

Its all too easy to dismiss their situation as the sufferings of a faceless collective; behind each green, orange or blue uniform there is a man - not a boy - whose situation is as singular, as each of our own highly personalised and complicated lives.

years and I only give KD150 to my father, he is angry now," he complained. He told me that at first, his father thought he was squandering his wages whilst living the high-life in Kuwait. When I asked why he doesn't just cut his losses and use the next KD100 he earns to fly home he responded with a wry smile, "My father will kill me! I have to get that KD650! Then I can go."

He had agreed to talk to me in the hope that his situation and that of thousands of others who exist in this "twilight zone" might be brought to the attention of the public.

He took out his wallet and showed me his Civil ID and an ATM card from a Kuwait bank.

"Some months I go to the bank and there is no salary." He said that he has gone up to two months with no salary. I asked him if his embassy could help. "My embassy, no good. What can I do?"

Abdul Kalam invited me to see the building where he and other cleaners employed by his company live. It is a two block, eight story housing complex, built in the style of a hostel or college dormitory. The building is located in the south of Kuwait city and is in marked contrast to the other luxury apartment buildings nearby, housing both Western and Indian professionals. The open space to the side of the building has become a rubbish tip that

doubles as a recycling depot, where some of the other cleaners try to supplement their incomes by collecting drink cans, used cardboard and plastic.

They are a common sight in this part of Kuwait, rummaging through rubbish skips to see if the waste of one economic strata can provide an income to another: a good evening's work can earn the independent recycler KD 1. "I did it one time, but the smell was very bad," he said as we passed a group of men busy gathering up cardboard and drink cans.

The dirty housing condition is sadly ironic given the occupation of its inhabitants. I counted thirty rooms on each floor, with eight men housed in each room. A con-

servative estimate would be at least a thousand men in each block. As we climbed the stairs, the human traffic moving up and down was more reminiscent of a city centre train station than a suburban housing complex. The lift had long since broken down, and its doors remained ajar on

one of the upper floors. The corridors were dirty and unlit. The room he shares with seven other men is about three metres by five, with a cooker against the wall. There is a toilet and washroom separate to these living/sleeping quarters. When I arrived, one of his roommates was preparing dinner, as they each take turns cooking. Pointing to the man chopping the vegetables on the floor he said "this man is the best cook." Their staple diet is rice and lentils and some fish whenever they can afford it. The youngest of them, an eighteen year old, was busy watching Indian music videos on their television. The air conditioning didn't work and my host

are the two most common sources of extra income. "There is no part-time job in Kuwait", he said ruefully. Out of all his complaints, this seemed to frustrate him the most. He bemoaned the lack of industry in Kuwait and said he should have gone to Malaysia, where he believed there are more factories and thus more work available.

The plight of Bangladeshi cleaners in Kuwait is not a new story by any means. Well publicised here, it must be equally well documented in Bangladesh. So what continues to drive people to accept postings such as these? A United Nations Development Program study in 2002 ranked Bangladesh as one of the least

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pointed to a fan heater he had rigged to act as a cooling fan.

Abdul Kalam lifted up some of their clothes that were hanging on the wall to reveal a hoard of cockroaches and other insects climbing the walls underneath. "Very bad" was his only comment, though one of the others seemed embarrassed that he was showing an outsider the worst of how they live. He then retrieved a photo album from under his bunk to show me pictures of his family. His father looked stern in a firmly pressed white shirt while his mother was dressed colourfully, in traditional Bengali clothes. He then pointed around the room and said "look at me." On one of the walls, someone had written a couple of sentences in Bengali script. When I asked him what it meant, he had to think for a moment before finding the words in English. "It's the Holy Quran, it says God loves everyone."

When I asked where the rest of his roommates were, he said that some of them had managed to get part-time work in the evening. Small independent restaurants and shopping malls

developed countries in the world. The report showed that 83 per cent of the population lived on less than \$2 dollar a day and that 36 per cent of the population lived on less than \$1 dollar a day.

Still, the situation in Kuwait has little to do with equilibrium in global labour markets. The simple fact is that these men are not receiving the salary that was promised them, regardless of whether you think KD50 would be an acceptable salary in an expensive country like Kuwait.

Generations of migrant workers and immigrants before them who made their way to America, Germany and the UK from places such as Ireland, Turkey and India. These people refuse to be (metaphorically) beaten down. Through a mixture of camaraderie, resilience and hard work, they are managing to survive, in spite of their situation. As I descended the stairs, a number of men were heading out again for the evening. Their day shift over, they were out to supplement their salaries with whatever work they could find.

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KUWAIT: The living conditions for menial labourers and cleaners are shameful. Trash piles in empty lots near apartments are common and apartments are overcrowded and dirty.

— Photos by Raymond Barrett