

## **Casket of Dreams: Deaths of Nepali Migrants Overseas**

This text is a report of some cases of foreign employment seekers and their families.

Karuna Subba of Chandragadhi, Jhapa is waiting for her husband's dead body outside the TIA's Arrival terminal. Dozens of migrant workers are rolling trolleys and passing her.

A casket was brought out with the body of Karuna's husband, Mani Kumar Subba, inside it. Mani Kumar had died in Saudi Arabia in September the previous year. The day before he died, Mani Kumar had called her from a friend's birthday party to tell her that he would be coming home two weeks later.

In the four months since Mani Kumar's death, Karuna ran from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the employment agency. She was told that her husband was found dead in a swimming pool, and that it would take some time for the body to be brought back.

On an average, each day, two dead Nepalis return in coffins from different countries. In 2009 alone, at least 600 Nepalis died in the Gulf countries, and in Malaysia. Unfortunately, the formal official process is so lengthy that the families have to wait up to six months.

Pushpa Bhattarai, section officer at the Ministry of foreign Affairs, tries to explain these deaths through several reasons:

- lack of pre-departure orientation

- lack of good accommodations,
- unhealthy lifestyles,
- workloads,
- depression,
- unbearably hot temperature.

One of the leading causes of death among migrant workers is heart failure.

In 2009, the death of 174 Nepalis working abroad was due to cardiac arrest (heart attack). Most labourers work in extremely hot desert temperatures of 50 to 55 degrees Celsius, and when their bodies cannot adjust to their air-conditioned rooms immediately, death is the result.

Many deaths are due to road accidents. The normal highway speeds are 140 km per hour. Most Nepalis are not used to such speeds and try crossing the road the same way they do in Nepal. There have also been murders among Nepalis and some have committed suicides due to family tensions back home.

After their loved one's demise the real struggles of the families begin. The process of sending the dead bodies and claiming dues and insurances fall under the duties of the Nepali Embassy in the country. But there is a long way to go for the Nepali bureaucrats in the Gulf to execute these processes. The language is the first barrier. Arabic is the sole medium of conversation. There is evidence of discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims

in the case of compensation. The Saudis are uncooperative with foreigners.

Back in Kathmandu, the relatives of the dead make rounds of manpower agencies and government offices hoping for a quick arrival of the body. A gloomy narrative emerges as you flip through the files: someone's dead son, someone's murdered husband. In most cases, the family loses its sole earner. Even after a prolonged process of transportation of the bodies and its eventual cremation, the complicated process of procuring the insurance money and the due salary is a big problem.

Lila Subedi of Jhapa lost two sons in six months. In April 2008, Bhim Bahadur Subedi died in a road accident. Six months later Dharma Subedi died in Malaysia.

Lila spent Rs.150, 000 to send two of his five sons abroad. Now, after their deaths, Lila has to take care of both families: Bhim left a son and wife, Dharma had two daughters and wife.

Lila's youngest son, Pushpa Subedi says, "After seeing the death of my two elder brothers, my family will never allow me to go abroad."