

Foreign Workers Stranded Without Money or Visas

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Body

BAGHDAD -- For months, they have sat here, half a block from the prime minister's palace in the Green Zone, essentially captives with little food, drinking water or electricity.

Humble laborers, they came to Baghdad in January from Eastern Europe and Asia seeking better wages. They had the important-sounding assignment of building a dozen villas to house heads of state for the annual meeting of the Arab League, which was scheduled to take place here.

But the project was halted in April for reasons that are unclear, and a month later, as the Arab Spring rolled on, the Arab League meeting was postponed until next year.

Now the workers -- 27 Ukrainians (including a woman), 7 Bulgarians and 1 Nepalese -- are marooned here, living in one of the world's hottest and most inhospitable cities in an abandoned building next to the construction site and lacking the documents they need to leave the country.

The abandoned building, which used to house a restaurant for American soldiers, barely has running water. It has no air-conditioning, so they spend most of their days sitting outside in just their underwear. From that vantage point they have an excellent view of convoys of high-ranking Iraqi and American officials driving past, apparently oblivious to the sign the laborers have affixed to a fence there calling for help in broken English.

Like prisoners, they pass the time playing cards and checkers, which are made out of water bottle caps. Packs of cigarettes are consumed daily. "We're not doing good," said one of the workers, who, like many others interviewed at the site, asked that his name not be disclosed because he feared for his safety.

In the mornings, the workers are awakened by the noise of rats running through the building. Their only hot meal is delivered every day around 3 p.m. by the International Organization for Migration. At night, some workers sleep outside because it is cooler. All of them listen for rockets and mortar shells aimed at the Green Zone, the highly protected area that houses the United States Embassy and many important Iraqi government buildings and that is a favorite target of insurgents. Unlike the embassy and the government buildings, the construction site does not have duck-and-cover bunkers.

Several weeks ago, one of the workers tried to commit suicide.

The annual meeting of the Arab League, which Iraqi leaders hoped would showcase the progress they claimed their country had made, was postponed because, with the Arab world boiling, many leaders did not want to leave their countries, in part out of fear they would never return.

For the laborers, the work initially sounded so appealing that they took out loans to pay recruiters in their native countries for the jobs. They were told that they would make \$2,500 a month and live in an air-conditioned room with

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electricity and an Internet connection. But when they arrived, the company in charge of the construction told them they would be paid \$1,500 a month and gave them the abandoned building to live in. The company was supposed to pay the workers on a monthly basis and give them proper visas, but neither of those things happened.

In April, the laborers were told to stop working because the money for the project had dried up. The construction, they were told, would resume in a few days.

But that did not happen, either.

The laborers do not want to leave without being paid the money they say they are owed. But even if they wanted to leave, they could not, because they have little money and could be arrested if Iraqi officials found they were living in the country without visas. So they have waited.

"We're not leaving until they shoot us," one of the workers said, repeating the vow to hold out until getting the money owed them. A few seconds later, he added, "But we don't even have an exit."

It is unclear who owes the laborers their wages. One company, the Salar Group, signed the initial multimillion-dollar contract with the minister of foreign affairs to build the villas. Then Salar apparently subcontracted the work to another company, Noblehaus. But Fawzi Abdullah, the owner of Noblehaus, said in a telephone interview that his company had nothing to do with construction and that he had only sold Salar the right to use his company's name because Salar was not registered in Iraq.

Mr. Fawzi said that the Iraqi government shut down the construction project because Salar was behind schedule and not using proper materials. He said that Salar did not specialize in construction projects and that he did not know why the government gave it the contract. "Those workers have nothing to do with all of that," he said. "Salar should resolve the issue and pay the workers their salaries."

An employee for Salar told a reporter on Wednesday that he should call back to speak with the head of the company. Three subsequent phone calls to the company were not answered.

Employees from one of the companies offered the workers \$1,000 each to leave. But they refused, according to the laborers, saying that it would not cover their costs to get home and was far less than they were owed.

The laborers said those employees told them that Iraqi security forces would come the next morning and drop those who did not accept the money outside the Green Zone, where they were likely to be killed. The migration organization pressured the security forces to stand down. Ultimately, they never showed up.

"The company that contracted with the employees lied to them about their salaries and the working conditions," said Livia Styp-Rekowska, a program officer for the International Organization for Migration. "You can say it's trafficking for labor exploitation. It's quite close to human trafficking." By the beginning of August, the migration group began providing them with aid.

Ms. Styp-Rekowska said that four of the workers -- one had damaged his kidneys by drinking nonpotable water -- had to be taken to the United Nations compound to see a doctor.

"When we took them to the U.N. compound, they looked unsettled," she said, adding that she asked them, "Is everything O.K.?" She said they replied, "It's cool. To be in an air-conditioned room is a treat."

She said the migration group had been pressuring the Iraqi government to force the companies to pay the workers the money due them -- about \$285,000 total -- and provide them with proper visas, so they can return home. Ms. Styp-Rekowska said the labor minister planned to raise the issue before Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki at a meeting on Thursday.

One of the laborers said his young children back in Ukraine did not understand his quandary.

"They ask their mother, 'Where's my father?' " he said. "I tell them, 'Just wait. Just wait.' "

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Graphic

PHOTOS: One of the laborers marooned in the Green Zone in Baghdad by a stalled building project. They say they are owed \$285,000.

Workers from Ukraine and Bulgaria picking up lunch at a canteen in the abandoned Baghdad building where they live. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSEPH SYWENKYJ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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