

Community eases workers' ordeal

Residents' compassion helps abandoned employees overcome hopeless situation

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Dubai : Community spirit has come to the rescue of nearly 1,000 stranded workers in Sharjah who have been abandoned by employers.

While over 900 workers have already flown home — thanks to the Ministry of Labour's intervention — the penniless workers have been able to see through their three-month ordeal surviving on aid provided by good Samaritans.

The employees of Atlantic Emirates Group (AEG) had allegedly not been paid for six months and were left without running water and power in their camps in the industrial area since March.

Crucial supplies cut

Speaking to XPRESS before leaving the UAE, some of these workers said the housing landlord and city officials had cut off the crucial supplies after AEG apparently stopped paying monthly utility bills. The business group had reportedly incurred heavy losses in the construction industry slump.

The camp kitchen and toilets had decayed into rotting messes, while workers huddled under the shade of canopies made from clothes tied together. Penniless and stranded, they couldn't even afford to call home — India, Pakistan and Bangladesh — to update family members on their situation here. "Who would give us loans? We prayed for patience," a Pakistani labourer said.

While the Ministry of Labour recovered their passports from the troubled company and arranged flight tickets to their home countries, social workers scrambled to bring daily relief to these workers.

Support groups

British housewife Saher Shaikh put together a list of needed items after visiting them in Sharjah and rallied volunteers to help out with supplies. Her pleas struck a chord with students, parents and staff of Repton School Dubai. They arranged some 1,800 "care packages" filled with essentials like toiletries, clothes and even Muslim prayer mats. "They [workers] just wanted some place clean to pray. They were so dignified, such honourable men. They didn't want to be a burden on anyone," Shaikh said.

"The schoolchildren had also sent notes of support like 'keep smiling' or 'we care about you'. The workers asked me to translate them as most of them don't speak English. Many of them have kids back home and they starting crying."

Team spirit

Daily meals also started trickling in, thanks mostly to non-profit group Kerala Youth Cultural Club.

Seeing the community spirit, nearby grocery shops, laundry services and cafeterias were also touched — they opened lines of credit for these workers. The bills were later settled at the Dubai airport, where authorities distributed the backlog of wages before workers boarded flights.

The salaries were reportedly recovered from AEG's security deposits at the labour and immigration departments.

Only some 40 labourers have not yet returned to their families, a labour ministry official said. "They will also leave within this week," he added.

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