

Pakistani migrants

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IT is no secret that low-wage workers in the Gulf are the most vulnerable of Pakistan's expatriate community. The kafala (sponsorship) system giving employers tremendous control over workers has created exploitation of a magnitude that can be compared to modern slavery. It is also no surprise that these states have the highest population of Pakistani prisoners abroad. Their notoriously opaque legal systems essentially deprive migrants of their rights through habitual due process violations. Over the past few days, as our new government has sought to cement its ties with Saudi Arabia — which, despite a dramatic reduction in Pakistani labour in recent years (50,000 in the past eight months alone) is still one of its largest employers — its constituents at home and abroad have been calling for commitments of another kind. On Tuesday, a Senate body was told that around 650 laid-off Pakistani workers are now petitioning Saudi labour courts to claim their unpaid dues. According to an overseas Pakistanis ministry official, one firm owes 127m Saudi riyals in back wages. Similar cases have been reported in the past. Meanwhile, on Wednesday, protesters in Islamabad called on the government to assist in the release of their loved ones currently incarcerated in the kingdom. There are approximately 3,000 Pakistanis languishing in Saudi prisons, including many on death row. Since 2014, the kingdom has executed more than 70 Pakistanis, most of them poor and convicted on drug 'smuggling', which they were likely tricked or coerced into.

While the issue of unpaid salaries, as well as of increasing the job quota for Pakistanis, reportedly being broached with the visiting Saudi delegation, is a positive step, there is an urgent need to address the lack of safeguards — functional consular services, legal support, a prisoner transfer treaty and a labour agreement — for Pakistanis living in Saudi Arabia. They, and their families at home, are desperate for a more equitable relationship between our two nations. Clearly, it is not only livelihoods but lives that are at stake.

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