

Underclass of Workers Created in Iraq; Many Foreign Laborers Receive Inferior Pay, Food and Shelter

by Ariana Eunjung Cha - Washington Post

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The war in Iraq has been a windfall for Kellogg Brown & Root Inc., the company that has a multibillion-dollar contract to provide support services for U.S. troops. Its profits have come thanks to the hard work of people like Dharmapalan Ajayakumar, who until last month served as a kitchen helper at a military base.

But Ajayakumar, 29, a former carpenter's assistant from this coastal town, was not there by choice.

He said he was tricked into going to Iraq by a recruiting agent who told him the job was in Kuwait. Moreover, he said, the company skimped on expenses by not providing him and other workers with adequate drinking water, food, health care or security for part of their time in the war zone.

"I cursed my fate -- not having a feeling my life was secure, knowing I could not go back, and being treated like a kind of animal," said Ajayakumar, who worked for less than \$7 a day.

Working alongside Americans trying to rebuild Iraq are an estimated tens of thousands of foreign contractors without whom the reconstruction could not function. Many toil for wages that are one-tenth -- or less -- of what U.S. workers might demand, saving millions of taxpayer dollars.

The employees were hired through a maze of recruiters and subcontractors on several continents, making oversight and accountability of the workforce difficult.

Pakistan is looking into reports that recruiters were illegally trying to hire security personnel to go to Iraq. The Philippines is assessing protection measures for its nationals after attacks killed two military support workers. And India is conducting an investigation into the dining service workers' allegations.

The State Department said it received a request from India for assistance and has passed it along to the Defense Department. A spokeswoman for the Army, which manages the KBR contract, said the responsibility for the investigation rests with the company.

KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton Co., came to employ Ajayakumar and other Indian workers through five levels of subcontractors and employment agents. The company, which employs 30,000 workers from 38 countries in support of the U.S. military, said it had been unaware of the workers' concerns until recently.

KBR spokeswoman Patrice Mingo said the company met with representatives of the Indian government to discuss the complaints. For now, there is "no substantiated proof on which to take action," Mingo said, but the company is open to discussing the matter further with current or former employees.

"KBR does not condone and will not tolerate any practice that unlawfully compels subcontract employees to perform work or remain in place against their will," Mingo said.

The reconstruction of Iraq has provided workers from developing countries with job opportunities they might otherwise never have had. But the vast difference in the recruiting, compensation, accommodations and protection of some foreigners versus their American counterparts is raising uncomfortable questions about how companies calculate the value of a life in Iraq.

South Korean engineers working on Iraq's power grid have complained they did not get the flak jackets and helmets issued to U.S. co-workers. Some Filipino cleaners and other support workers have said they were given others' spoiled food to eat. And some of the Indian workers said they were brought in on buses with only gauze curtains to hide them from insurgents while many other contractors come into the country on chartered planes or in convoys with military escorts.

"They were working under threat and fear of death," said S. Sreejith, superintendent of police for Kollam, where the workers' complaints were first filed. American companies "are making money off of cheating our people."

Rep. Janice D. **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.) said contractors' use of multiple layers of subcontracts makes it difficult for the U.S. government to ensure the fair treatment of the workers it effectively employs.

"The whole area of private military contractors is very murky in terms of accountability, chain of command and relationship to our mission," she said, "but as you get into subcontracting it gets murkier and murkier . . . and you can't tell what's going on."

Manpower Export Market

The Indian state of Kerala where Ajayakumar grew up is most famous for being the center of the international spice trade in the 16th century. Today, it's known for its export of another important commodity: manpower.

Several million expatriates from Kerala, on the southern tip of the country, serve in the Persian Gulf region in jobs from doctors to gardeners. The money has transformed the state from a tropical backwater popularized in Arundhati Roy's 1997 Booker Prize-winning novel "The God of Small Things" to a modern center of commerce.

Ajayakumar was thrilled when a recruiting agent came to him in June 2003 and offered to "sell" him a two-year work visa in Kuwait for a catering company job that would pay \$200 a month --

five times what he was making at the carpenter's shop. He gladly paid the agent's \$1,800 fee, borrowing from local loan sharks, calculating that he would still make out with significant profits.

In late July, Ajayakumar boarded a train for Mumbai along with several dozen other Indian workers who were recruited for contract work: Abdul Jaleel Shani, 24, who had worked at a wedding store; brothers Abdul Aziz Hamid, 30, and Abdul Aziz Shahjahan, 28, who were butchers; and Manzoor Haneefa Kunju, 29, and Aliyaru Kunju Faisil, 34, who had worked at local hotels.

There, at an employment agency called Subhash Vijay Associates, they signed some papers and were handed tickets to Kuwait.

In Kuwait City, the workers were put on a bus and told they were going to "the border."

It didn't stop until they arrived at Q-West, a camp occupied by the 101st Airborne Division near the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. There, the men became part of the largest civilian workforce supporting the U.S. military in history. Subhash Vijay had hired them to work for Gulf Catering Co. of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which was subcontracted to Alargan Group of Kuwait City, which was subcontracted to the Event Source of Salt Lake City, which in turn was subcontracted to KBR of Houston.

They were issued ID cards that said "Brown & Root."

In a typical U.S. government contract, there are no restrictions on the number and "tiers" of subcontractors that can be used -- creating situations like the one that Ajayakumar and the other Indian workers were in. The contractor, in this case KBR, often must report only the first tier of subcontractors, meaning that the government is often unaware of how its work gets done or by whom. The General Accounting Office over the past decade has raised concerns about the lack of visibility when multiple layers of subcontractors, especially foreign subcontractors, are involved, but the policy has not changed.

Unfriendly Surroundings

At Q-West, Ajayakumar and Shani worked the day shift scrubbing the floors, carrying boxes and doing other odd jobs for the dining facility. Hamid and Shahjahan worked nights chopping food and helping the cooks. They said they were terrified by the frequent gunfire and mortar and rocket attacks, but what really upset them was the way they were treated by others on the base.

"The attitude of the people was not friendly at all. We were doing a service for these people but they shouted at us and talked down to us," Hamid said.

While their Western managers slept in air-conditioned trailers, they were crammed into tents in 100-degree-plus temperatures. The cooks set aside some rice and curry for them but it was not enough and they had to supplement their food with whatever was left over from the soldiers' meals -- which was often nothing. They were told they could not take the filtered bottled water but instead must drink the Iraqi tap water that was poured into aluminum buckets with tablets of chlorine and chunks of ice. The workers would pick through the soldiers' trash and retrieve the empty water bottles that they would use as cups.

Ajayakumar said he threw up for weeks from the contaminated water. He was allowed to see an Iraqi doctor who gave him one pill -- without explaining what it was for and which did nothing to alleviate his symptoms.

His co-workers had other complaints: that they were assigned to do construction work they weren't hired for, that they weren't adequately compensated for their 12- to 16-hour days, that Hindus were served beef, that Muslims were instructed to handle pork.

The workers said they felt trapped. They didn't want to be in Iraq, but returning home meant no more jobs, paying their own travel expenses and forfeiting the agent's fees. Plus, their bosses were holding their passports.

Three months into the men's stay in Iraq, there were explosions near the base and people ran out of the tents. While other contractors came out in full protective gear and jumped into their cars, the kitchen workers were told to stand outside near a tent in their pajamas.

"At that moment we realized that they are privileged people and we are nothing," Shani said.

One evening soon afterward, when they were handed a dinner of beef curry that hadn't been fully cooked, several dozen of them went to their manager, who worked for Gulf Catering, to complain. According to the workers, the man told them they would not get any more food. "We bought you," he reportedly said. Some Indian workers were so furious they packed their bags and began walking to the gates of the base. Another manager, who worked for the Event Source, raced over to them and urged them to stay, promising changes.

Things improved somewhat after that conversation, the workers said, and they got their own food, both vegetarian and meat curry each night, bottled water and -- by January -- many had air-conditioned trailers. Still, many felt defeated by the first few difficult months. And so in May when they were offered a bus ride out of Iraq, nearly everyone accepted.

Fighting Back

As the men returned to Kerala, they began filing complaints -- about a dozen so far -- with the local police department, which has launched an investigation into how they were recruited.

The local employment agents, Subhash Vijay, Gulf Catering and Alargan did not respond to requests for comment.

Paul Morrell, president of the Event Source, whose representative was in charge of the dining facilities at Q-West, said he was surprised by the workers' allegations. He said the Event Source's agreement with its subcontractors requires them to provide adequate food and water and flak jackets, helmets and security guards to workers when they travel to and from bases. But, he acknowledged, the company had been unable to independently verify whether the requirements had been met.

"Any time workers expressed concerns, people got involved. They made sure the workers were

treated fairly," Morrell said.

Meanwhile, Ajayakumar and the others are trying to bail themselves out of debt. While they were paid their promised base salaries -- how much overtime they deserved and got is a matter of dispute -- it was not enough to make up for the agent's fee and the interest payments many had racked up. They had assumed they would be working for two years, not nine months.

Ajayakumar has no job and no job prospects.

The only thing he has from his time in Iraq is a certificate of appreciation from KBR. It thanks him for his help in the success of the "dinning [sic] facility" at the camp. Thank you, the tribute on standard 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper reads, "for your tireless effort."