

URGENT ACTION

WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS DETAINED FOR MONTHS

At least 41 Sri Lankan women migrant workers have been detained in Saudi Arabia for as long as 18 months. Three women have young children with them, and one woman is known to be in urgent need of medical care. None of the women have been informed of any charges against them, nor have they been granted any legal support to better understand the length or reason for their detention. Sri Lankan authorities must proactively take measures to ensure their immediate repatriation so that these women are able to return home and reunite with their families.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

State Minister of Foreign Employment Promotion
and Market Diversification

Piyankara Jayaratne

Nawala, Sri Lanka

Email: ministerofficemfe@gmail.com
secretary@mtfes.gov.lk

Dear Minister Jayaratne,

I'm writing to express my grave concern about the worrying and continuing delay in the repatriation of 41 Sri Lankan women migrant domestic workers who are currently detained at the Exit 18 Deportation Detention (Tarheel) Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

It is distressing to learn that none of the women have been informed of the charges against them, nor have they been granted legal support to understand why and for how long they will continue to be detained. Detained for periods ranging from eight to 18 months, at least three women have young children detained with them, and at least one woman is known to be in urgent need of medical care which she is not receiving. Prison officials have repeatedly promised the women that they will be repatriated imminently in recent months, but they all remain in detention as of April 2021.

While I understand that the Sri Lankan embassy in Riyadh has been in touch with the detained women and has offered multiple reassurances, however it is concerning that no one has yet been repatriated. The government must ensure that the costs of repatriation, such as airfare and any COVID-related quarantine requirements, are covered as many of the detainees cannot afford them.

The Sri Lankan government has an obligation to protect the human rights of all of its migrant workers in Saudi Arabia and to work in a timely manner to ensure that these detained workers are released and safely returned to Sri Lanka. Migrant workers are one of the major contributors to the Sri Lankan economy, and the government must not turn its back when it's most needed.

I call on you to ensure that the Sri Lankan government acts urgently,

- To facilitate and ensure the voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriation of all detained migrant workers as soon as possible***
- Guarantee adequate consular support to all those detained to ensure their medical needs are met promptly and they enjoy decent conditions in detention.***

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

At least 41 Sri Lankan domestic workers are currently detained at the Exit 18 Deportation Detention (*Tarheel*) Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia awaiting repatriation.

While the authorities have not disclosed the legal basis for the women's detention, it is believed that many of the women have been detained due to their migration status under the notorious kafala system in place in Saudi Arabia. This includes reasons such as the expiration of their work permit and their employer's failure to obtain an exit permit for them or because they have fled from an abusive employer.

The majority of the women wish to return to their home country in recent months. Prison officials as well as the Sri Lankan embassy officials in Riyadh have repeatedly promised the women that they will be repatriated imminently, however they are still in detention as of April 2021.

Domestic workers are among the most vulnerable group of migrant workers in the Gulf countries. Often isolated within homes and highly dependent on their employers in almost every aspect of their lives, they are also not covered by labour law protections across the Gulf including Saudi Arabia. They are at risk of being detained for overstaying their residence permits, often because their sponsors failed to renew it or because they fled abuse and exploitation. They usually face gruelling working conditions with many working long hours without breaks or days off. They also frequently face verbal and physical abuse and have their passports regularly confiscated at the hands of abusive employers who act with impunity. Recent labour reforms in Saudi Arabia excluded domestic workers, meaning that they still cannot leave the country without the permission of their employers, which increases their vulnerability to abuses of their rights, including forced labour and physical and sexual assault.

The Sri Lankan and Saudi Arabia governments have obligations to protect migrant workers from abuse under a range of international treaties they have ratified, including the International Labour Organization's Forced Labour Convention. In this case they must ensure the urgent release from arbitrary detention and voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriations of all the affected women.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English or Sinhala

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 15 June 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Group (they/them)

ADDITIONAL TARGETS

Mr. Kamal Ratwatte
Chair, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
chmn@slbfe.lk

And copies to:

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