

Indian police find 300 trafficked brick kiln workers in dire conditions

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By Jatindra Dash

BHUBANESWAR, India, Dec 11 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Officials investigating the death of a 30-year-old pregnant woman working at a brick kiln in southern India said on Friday they had uncovered an organised racket where hundreds of people were being trafficked and forced to work in inhumane conditions.

Labour officials and police in Telangana state said Suriya Bag, a migrant woman from the neighbouring state of Odisha, died on Dec. 3 when, despite having a fever and being four months pregnant, she was forced to work at the kiln, 180 km (110 miles) from Hyderabad city.

"When she expressed her inability (to work), the owner and the supervisors allegedly kicked her stomach and that resulted in bleeding," Telangana's Deputy Labour Commissioner A. Gandhi told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Immediately she was taken to a local doctor where she died during treatment."

Gandhi said during an investigation into the death, police and labour officials visited the brick kiln and found 293 people, including women and children, working there in unhygienic and inhumane conditions.

He said the workers had been packed into tiny filthy rooms made of thatch and made to sleep on mats. There were no toilets which meant men, women and children were bathing and defecating in the open and little food was provided to them, he added.

Gandhi said the rescued migrants had been sent back to their homes in Odisha and Bag's family given compensation of 70,000 rupees (\$1,040) by the Telangana state government.

The brick kiln owner and three supervisors have been arrested and charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder which carries a minimum sentence of 10 years in jail.

But local activists said the owner should also be charged for bonded labour.

"The labourers were subjected to bonded labour conditions. They were given advances of between 25,000 - 50,000 rupees per family, before being trafficked from Odisha to Telangana and forced to work as families in a brick kiln," P. Vasudeva Rao of National Adivasi Solidarity Council said in a statement.

"They did not receive minimum wage, had restricted freedom of movement and were subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Their living conditions were unhygienic and they had no proper facilities."

Gandhi said the government has initiated action against the owner for the violating various labour laws, but disagreed the migrant workers were bonded labourers.

Thousands of Indians - largely from poor, rural areas are lured to other states each year by traffickers who promise good jobs but sell them into domestic or sex work or to industries such as brick kilns and textile workshops.

In many cases, they are not paid or are held in debt bondage. Some go missing, with

their families unable to trace them.

(Reporting by Jatindra Dash in BHUBANESWAR. Writing by Nita Bhalla. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, corruption and climate change. Visit www.trust.org)

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