

Rescued bonded labourers in India to get more compensation

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By Anuradha Nagaraj

CHENNAI, India (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - The Indian government plans a five-fold increase in compensation given to rescued bonded labourers, but campaigners said more must be done to ensure vulnerable people receive the money soon after being rescued, so they can start new lives.

The revised guidelines, awaiting final approval from the Ministry of Labour and Employment, would increase compensation to a minimum of 100,000 rupees (\$1,450) from 20,000 rupees (\$290), a senior ministry official said.

The first revision of the scheme since 1999 also creates special categories to compensate young children, including orphans, disabled people and girls rescued from begging rings and brothels.

A category for transgenders, who often end up begging on the streets, has also been created and they will be provided with the maximum compensation of 300,000 rupees (\$4,360).

Almost 36 million people are enslaved worldwide, trafficked into brothels, forced into manual labour, stuck in debt bondage or born into servitude, according to the 2014 Global Slavery Index.

Nearly half - 16 million - are in India. Many are lured from poor, rural areas with the promise of good jobs or marriage, but then sold into domestic work, prostitution, brick kilns or textile industries. Most are unpaid or held in debt bondage.

More than a quarter of a million bonded labourers have been compensated since the scheme was put in place in 1978, according to government figures.

Until now, each identified bonded labourer is given 2,000 rupees (\$29) immediately after being rescued and sent back to their home with the promise of an additional 20,000 rupees (\$290).

"It's too little and often comes too late," said S. Vasanthi, member of the Thiruvallur district Released Bonded Labour Association in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

"Some of us have waited for nearly two years for this amount, which doesn't really help us. How can anyone start afresh with just 20,000 rupees?"

Between 1978 and 2015, the union and state governments in India have collectively spent nearly two billion rupees on rehabilitation assistance for those rescued from bonded labour. But with only 18 of 29 Indian states following the scheme, a substantial proportion of funds are unspent.

The ministry official, who declined to be identified by name, said the central government would take over the scheme to ensure payments were made swiftly. Part of the funds would be put in an annuity scheme for rescued workers to provide a monthly income.

State governments would continue to provide shelter and livelihood options, he said.

T. Kuralmuthan of the non-profit organisation International Justice Mission said the slow moving wheels of Indian justice were also hampering efforts to help victims.

"The release of compensation is linked to the registering of an official complaint and the following police investigations," he said. "In Tamil Nadu for instance, our case studies show that it takes an average two years for a case of bonded labour to reach the courts."

In most cases, full compensation is only released only after this process is completed.

(Reporting by Anuradha Nagaraj, Editing by Ros Russell; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking and climate change. Visit www.trust.org)

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