

Indian workers' issue solved: Saudi envoy



• Suhasini Haidar

Initial reports had highly exaggerated an isolated case, says Ambassador.

The problems of Indian workers in Saudi Arabia have been “resolved”, the Kingdom’s Ambassador to India said, maintaining that the plight of Indians, who had gone without food for three days, was “an isolated case”.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Ambassador Saud Bin Mohammed Al Sati said all workers affected would be fed, have papers arranged and flown back to India, if required, at the expense of the Saudi government.

“The problem was the result of an individual act by one company (Saudi Oger Construction Company). We are also aware of the company that is responsible, and steps have been taken about it. But let me repeat, this was an isolated case, not a trend or some phenomenon existing across other companies.”

Mr. Al-Sati rejected reports that have described a growing crisis for Indian workers, as other construction companies in the country including Saudi Oger, Bin Ladin Group and Saad have laid off thousands in the wake of declining oil prices and an economic downturn. “Three million Indians live and work in Saudi Arabia, enjoy their life in Saudi Arabia. And there has been no change in the average number of Indians travelling to work in Saudi Arabia. So where is the problem?” he said to *The Hindu*.

At a press conference in Delhi, MEA spokesperson Vikas Swarup also confirmed that the governments were now working together to resolve all the four issues relating to the Indian workers, who mainly belonged to the Saudi Oger construction company: food and shelter issues, unpaid wages, transfers to other companies for employment, and possible repatriation to India of those wishing to return.

“Due to our excellent relationship with Saudi Arabia and efforts made at the highest level, things are in control and this humanitarian issue is being handled with utmost care and consideration,” Mr. Swarup said.

On July 30, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had launched an operation to rescue Indian workers in Saudi Arabia, some of whom had reached out to her on Twitter. Deputing Ministers of State Gen. (Retd.) V.K. Singh and M.J. Akbar to liaise with Saudi authorities, Ms. Swaraj said she had organised the distribution of more than 15,000 kgs of food to workers at camps in Jeddah and Riyadh.

“The number of Indian workers facing food crisis in Saudi Arabia is over Ten Thousand. It is not 800 as is being reported,” Ms Swaraj tweeted even as Gen. Singh left for Riyadh on a mission they dubbed “No Indian left behind”.

However, after meeting with the Saudi Labour Minister, Gen. Singh said the Saudi government, on instructions from King Salman had agreed to help the workers. Mr. Singh also told reporters in Riyadh that the original estimations of workers troubles was a “wrong projection” and should not be “blown out of proportion.”

Ambassador Al-Sati said that figures crossing 10,000 workers affected were “initial reports, but after investigation we realised that the numbers of those affected are approximately 2,500.”

Asked if bilateral relations had been strained over the incident, the Ambassador said the numbers involved represented a fraction of the Indian population in Saudi Arabia. “Obviously, if some complain, then the government is bound to listen and wish to help. But that doesn’t change the relationship. There is no other relationship like this, and it is not just government-to-government but people-to-people ties that bind us,” he added.