

CASE STUDY



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA



“I pray to God that something like this should never happen to anybody. Because it may be nice to hear the tales of someone’s struggle, but in reality it is very difficult to bear.”

Indian seafarers have returned from the Falkland Islands after surviving horrific abuse at sea. Human Rights at Sea received their first-hand account and witness statements. These seafarers wanted their story told.

Ramanujam’s Account

“I never thought that life would ever take such a turn. Now I feel that all the mountains of problems of the world have fallen upon me. I cannot figure out what to do because I am 27 years old, I have been married and I have a child but I have not got a proper job.

I was thinking about it when I suddenly thought of Auntie’s son who has been in the Merchant Navy for a year. I went to my uncles’ son’s house and spoke to him who said I shall talk about you and you make all the preparations. The office is in Dhanbad, Jharkhand. We shall go there. I agreed to go there.

The next day on 28th March 2014 both of us left for the XXXX office. There I met an office manager called XXXX. The both of us talked and he said that “there shall be training for six months and after that you shall get a placement abroad. Your initial salary shall be 500 US Dollars and after one year it you shall start getting 1000 Dollars and the placement charge was four lakhs. You shall have to complete the placement in one month”.

I fell into a lot of worry that how shall I be able to collect such a big amount of money. I said OK. I shall go home and let you know. Then I came home and spoke to my father. My father said, “alright, it shall take some time but I shall try and arrange the money”.

I rang up XXXX at the XXXX office and said “alright the arrangements shall be made for the money and I want the job”. XXXX said do not worry, “I shall give you the job bring the money and come”.

My training started in Kolkata on 1st April 2014. After completing the training I came to the XXXX office and spoke about the placement and asked when it shall be done. XXXX said that the placement shall be made after 15 days. 15 days passed but nothing of that sort happened.

I kept visiting the office again and again and sometimes I used to stay back at the office. Then he rang me on 29th September to say that your flight is on 18th January, the visa application needs to be made so come to the office.

When I came to the office XXXX said that there are seven other people with you who will also go with you and the joining is in Manila, Philippines. I met the seven other boys. They were from Haryana, Punjab and we had a general conversation. They said that they had also waited for four months, but no problem we will all go now. Everybody had deposited money but the amount was not the same because everyone had had their own negotiations.

We were all waiting for that auspicious day and we could not wait for it to come fast enough. We were thinking when we can go for the sake of our families.

Our flight was from Kolkata on 19th January at 12.20 AM and that is why we came to Kolkata on the 18th of January. From there all of us came to Hong Kong. From there the flight was on the 20th of January so all of us reached Manila on the 20th of January.

There the agent at Manila came to take us from the airport and he took us to the hotel. We stayed in the hotel for one day.

Our joining was on the 21st of January at 6 o clock and that is why we all got ready. The agent came and took us to the XXXX [ship] and left us there. When we went on board the ship we saw that it was a ship that catches fish. We were all very sad because we had been told something different.

XXXX told us that this ship shall go to [the] Falklands and it shall take a month to reach there and we shall have to begin working from tomorrow.

We came to our room and when we reached there we saw that it was a room with eight seats and two boys were already staying there from before. We decided that we shall all adjust in one room and we started staying there.

The food bell rang at six in the evening and all of us reached to eat and on reaching there we saw that all the food was non-vegetarian and there was rice along with it. We were all shocked to see this because we were told that we shall all be given Indian food. But there was nothing of that sort there.

When we asked which animal the meat came from then they said that it was the meat of a cow, pork and duck. Then we decided that we can not eat anything other than rice. We had rice mixed with salt and chillies.

The bell rang at six in the morning the next day and we were told to get ready for work. Then we got ready for work and then we were called to eat. When we reached to eat we saw that it was the same food which we could not eat. We thought about how would it be possible for us to work without eating because we were vomiting out all that we were eating. How long would we be able to survive just on rice?

Then we took a decision and went to see the captain and spoke to him about the food. He said that you shall have to eat this food and we said that we wanted to speak to the owner of the company. Then we were given a chance to talk to him and we told him everything and he said that everything to eat shall be given after reaching [the] Falklands. But we said that it shall take one month to reach Falklands. He said that he could not do anything till then.

We were subsisting on rice mixed with salt but day by day we were becoming more and more physically weaker and were unable to work because we had to work for 18 hours in a day.

Our condition had started to get very bad and we could not work.

Because of which the people there started beating us and we were forced to eat meat.

We were told that if we only ate rice we shall die for which the company shall not be responsible at all. Then we said that we cannot work here like this and that they should make arrangements to send us back home because many a times the boys there and XXXX used to mix pieces of beef in our rice because of which we could not eat.

We spent many days with a lot of difficulties and when our condition got very bad we asked the company to get out return tickets done from Falklands but the company said that they did not have any money to send us back home.

Then we called our agent who told us that if we transferred 1 lakh 80 thousand from our house to his account he shall be able to take us out from there. But where could we get money from because he was the person to whom we had given the money before. Some had given 4 lakh, some had given [*text unclear*].

Then we said that we did not know anything but you shall have to take us out from here.

He said that he did not know anything and whether you work or do not work I shall not give you any money.

Then we said that we shall die here to which our agent said that he was not bothered whether we live or die. I shall take the money from your insurance from the company and shall give it to your family. We were all shocked and he cut our phone off.

Then the captain said that you shall have to work or you shall be made to work forcefully. We said that we shall not work and then XXXX punched us because of which my friend was injured.

Then we said come on let us work because we had to go to Taiwan in July and from there we could go back home, but the work became even more difficult ahead. We had to work from 18-22 hours and that too without eating much.

We did not eat anything so how could we work. We were beaten every day. Then the company separated all 7 of us and I was sent to XXXX [other ship].

There too the same thing used to happen to me. The officer there also used to hit us. Sometimes they used to kick me and sometimes punch me. This was not only with me but with everyone else as well like Vietnam, Indonesia or China but they used to eat everything.

My condition deteriorated further in XXXX and the light from 3000 watt had made my eyesight grow weak.

Someone had a blood infection and it spread and we asked the captain 10-15 times to send us to the hospital and then finally we were transferred to the XXXX cargo ship.

We were transferred on the 20th of March because the captain of XXXX told us finally that we were to be put on a flight to India 2 days later.

We waited for many days but there was no information. We went to the captain and enquired. The captain said that our XXXX company XXXX was not sending any information and we do not know when you shall go. We shall let you know as soon as we receive any information.

But nothing of that sort happened and we just kept on waiting and waiting and now it had begun to feel as though we shall never be able to get back home. Our bodies were also failing us. Many a times I thought about jumping off from the ship into the sea but then I thought about my family, wife and child and would give myself some strength to carry on.

A month passed just thinking like this and now our condition had started to get even worse and we had not eaten anything for two-three days.

Then the captain said that I am sending all of you to the hospital so get ready. We reached Falklands Island on 17th April where we met an officer name XXXX. We told him all about our troubles. He took us to the hospital where we were all treated.

We told them that we want to go back home. Then they told us that there is a seaman centre and we shall take you there. So we all went there.

There they first of all made us speak to our families back home and then said do not worry we shall help you. Because all of you are very ill that is why the doctor has given a medical certificate and a visa application can be made and maybe you all shall reach home very fast.

Now we were all happy but there was just one cause of concern and that was the money that we had given to the agent in India.

How were we to get that money back because we were very poor and we had taken the money on interest and we were thinking about how our family members were paying the interest? They must be in a lot of difficulty in order to pay of the interest.

The officer told us on the 24th of April that your flight is on the 25th. Now the dream of going back home had been fulfilled. Now I am just thinking about how to get the money back which I had paid to the agent. Shall the agent give the money back or shall he refuse to pay back?

The XXXX office and staff are very nice people. These people gave us food, medical, clothes and shoes and said do not worry. May God bless such people. This is what we pray to God about.

We were the four people who were sent back home. But we do not know the condition of the other four people [who remained onboard].

I pray to God that something like this should never happen to anybody. Because it may be nice to hear the tales of someone's struggle, but in reality it is very difficult to bear.

I know that life is a struggle. If we had not struggled then we too might have still been with our other co-workers in XXXX. That is why one must never become despondent in times of trouble.”

END.

Note. There is no indication whatsoever that the Falkland Islands Government was complicit in any way with the ill treatment of the seafarers at the hands of their former employers. Human Rights at Sea understands that at all times, and while under their care, the relevant organisations of the Falkland Islands provided full pastoral support and assistance to the Indian seafarers who voluntarily left their vessel and sought sanctuary ashore following their abuse onboard. The witness statements have been translated and redacted to protect the seafarer's identities.

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