

Witness

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Slaves of Dubai

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Translated from German by Christopher Iverson

Construction in the United Arab Emirates is increasing at a fever pitch. This is made possible by the labor of scores of foreign workers.

Twenty men stand in their damp blue overalls, all chestnut skinned workers sweating as much as their pores will allow. They are taking a short break, and drinking lukewarm water from plastic bottles while the thermometer reads 102 degrees Fahrenheit. It is only eleven o'clock. "I don't feel like a foreigner in Dubai," says Kaleem Khan, 23, who lays concrete.

And so he shouldn't. Many workers are like Kaleem. Six out of every ten people who live in the United Arab Emirates comes from India. Others come from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Together, these groups build the unprecedented architectural wonders of the Saudi peninsula – the monoliths of a Bedouin population. Here the skyscrapers sprout from the earth like grass on a lawn. These foreign workers toil twelve hours a day, six days a week for low wages. In the land of rich Sheikhs, they are the have-nots without whom nothing happens. They are the slaves of Dubai.

Kaleem earns the equivalent of \$217 U.S. per month. At home, in a slum of Mumbai, that is a fortune, but here Dubai it is a pittance. Therefore Kaleem does little more than work and what he does earn he sends home to his family.



A bus brings men back and forth to work. They must live outside of the city.



Habil comes from Pakistan. He doesn't know yet how long he will stay.



Sheik Zayed Road is the main traffic thoroughfare through new Dubai. Workers are expanding it to ten lanes.



Dubai's downtown area rises out of the desert.

The break is over and it's back to the top story for Kaleem. "I'm proud to take part in the construction of the biggest house in the world," he says. After its completion this year, the Burj Dubai will measure well over 3,280 feet in height. The building's owners are keeping the exact height a secret. The building site is cluttered with the swinging arms of cranes, which move through the air like tentacles and swing their loads past the wispy clouds hanging in the surrounding sky. One out of every six cranes in the world is in Dubai.

Tourists bustle around the construction site. One of them, an architect from Canada, exclaims, "Unbelievable," between the clicks of his camera. He clearly feels intimidated by such a large, somewhat phallic structure. In fact, in Qatar and Saudi Arabia larger buildings are in the works. Nobody wants to be outdone.







The Burj Dubai building. It will become the highest building in the World, over 800 meters high.



Burj Dubai at night, driving on Sheik Zayed Road.

At a cost of over \$1.8 billion U.S., the Burj has been more expensive than the citizens of Dubai expected. Two thousand and four hundred foreign workers labor here daily in two shifts. The fifty-four double-decker elevators will travel fifty-nine feet per second and the cooling system will give off more cold air than 9,000 metric tons of melting ice per day. The one-hundred and sixty stairways are fireproofed, which after 9/11 has proven necessary. One-thousand palm trees with fluttering crowns will soon be planted around the building. Everything has a Tower of Babel quality to it.

Kaleem must remain sober-minded for this job. He and his colleagues make sure that the concrete is laid in the right place, that the air is shaken from it so that it forms a firm base to which the walls be secured. "I haven't fallen in yet," he says laughingly.

The foreman comes by. "You can't stay here," he barks to the crowd of visitors in bad English. "This construction site is private property. You need a permit." He notices that the group is German and invites some to his trailer for tea. On the wall hang the building

plans. An old printer screams like an abused cat. "The Germans have produced many notable people," he says, "even though they built smaller buildings than the Emirates." While the foreman recounts these tales in his office, Kaleem still sweats it out under the sun, stories above.

Ninety percent of Dubai's 1.6 million residents are foreigners, some of whom are businessmen, playboys, or those who have immigrated out of a sense of adventure. The majority, however, are poorly-paid foreign laborers. In a few decades, Dubai has transformed into an Arab "world city." It produces neither large quantities of oil nor terrorists; rather it sells dreams. In addition to a shopping mall with a ski slope, Dubai has five-star hotels like the Burj-al-Arab, built in the shape of a solar sail, and a group of islands, recognizable— from space - as a map of the world.



There are over 50,000 millionaires among 200,000 locals. The average income of a construction worker is \$180 a month.



This man waters the imported palm trees in front of Burj Dubai construction site. He does it every day all year long.

The island of Palm Jumeirah is one of the newest exercises in decadence. The man-made island, built from imported sand, was made in the shape of a palm tree. On this island stands villa after villa, each of which costs roughly \$4,341,000. There are also many foreign workers here. Undernourished Pakistani gardeners flit through the alleys while stout Filipino security guards are on patrols, ousting undesirables. From here the Burj can be seen in the distance between the clouds.

To counter the daily traffic jams a vast elevated railway is in the works. Between the concrete pillars of this railway are scaffolds, on which the foreign workers sit like swallows on a power line. The air tastes like rancid oil. Iron trusses intersect with one another creating the skeleton of the future elevated tracks. Here, as with the construction of the skyscraper, two shifts work around the clock to install the molding for the pillars before they pour the concrete. The Sheikhs are in a hurry to get this built. For this reason alone the shark-toothed, thirty-one year-old Filipino laborer sweats like a boxer in the eighth round as he works on this scaffolding. That is the reason why everyone sweats in Dubai.

Not far from Palm Island is the Dubai Marina, a “marina of superlatives.” There, for a change, one will find no foreign laborers. This is a place of conspicuous consumption. The windshields of the cars are tinted, as if those inside are important. Emirates with flowing caftans and waving scarves stroll across the boardwalks, children play in the fountains, and tourists eat in outrageously expensive restaurants or smoke hookahs. The Sheesha sits in the body of the hookah pipe, connected to the guests by hoses that sprout from it as if it were a beast with many heads. This beast blubbers and gurgles like a clogged drain. “Such is Dubai: Decadent and unhurried,” says Ali, a local who works in city administration. The citizens are known for not doing labor; most of them work as civil servants or in state enterprises. They represent power, while Kaleem from India or the ironworker with the shark teeth on Palm Island represent impotence.



Dubai is dominated by the colors red and white.



The community of Palm Jumeirah.



Workers leave the construction site at day's end.



The city is covered with advertising which is pure irony in relationship to the workers lives.



This impotence is rarely overcome because the foreign workers do not have labor unions. In 2006 some one hundred of these workers demonstrated for better working conditions. The protest was heated and eventually became violent, but for a moment the dignity of the little man came to the fore. In the end, though, the protest made little difference, as the group's ringleader was expelled from the country. These days, to avoid such disturbances, it is normal that workers who do damage to the construction site are immediately put on a plane, never to return. Officially, workers are not to work when the thermometer exceeds 113 degrees Fahrenheit, but miraculously, no official measurements have ever reached this temperature. On top of this, the construction moguls often go months without issuing paychecks. According to Amnesty International, the suicide rate among these workers has been rising for years.

This is why Kaleem has not attended recent protests. "I want to work, so that things will start going better for me." Like most foreign workers, the twenty-three year-old was hired back home and imported



Men leave the construction site and are bused to housing built specifically for them.

to Dubai. After a physical examination, he got his visa and a plane ticket, which he has paid off in installments over the last three years.

Kaleem has never had a girlfriend and has never been in love. He sends every leftover penny home to his parents in Mumbai. This is enough money that half of his extended family can benefit from it. In India, a Dubai slave can live like a king. Kaleem wants to work in the United Arab Emirates as long as possible. He dreams of returning to Mumbai a made man. “To buy a house and get married, that would be the life,” says Kaleem with a gleam in his eye.

It is seven p.m. Kaleem has slaved away for twelve-and-a-half hours on the Burj. His hands are black and bits of concrete hang from his eyebrows. The work gang sits on the bus that will take them home. Many fall asleep during the twenty-five minute ride, exhausted from the day, the work, and the life of a foreign laborer.

Home is a camp in the desert on the outskirts of Dubai. Dim light illuminates the barracks, which have high turnover rates. Nothing hangs on the walls and the workers keep their few possessions under their beds. “Here we live as if in an orphanage, but privacy isn’t so important,” says Sanjay, who shares a shack with Kaleem.

Wild cats roam about the grounds while Kaleem cooks for himself and the other workers. Today it’s chicken and rice. Some make jokes over dinner, but most are just exhausted. By ten p.m. most of the workers fall asleep on their foam rubber mattresses. Work begins again at six in the morning.

Meanwhile the financial crisis has reached Dubai and affected the opulent lifestyle there as well as the construction industry. This “Venice on the Gulf,” a fantasy world of skyscrapers, parks and canals named the Jumeriah Islands, which Sheikh and Crown Prince of Dubai Mohammed bin Rachid al-Maktoum wanted to build, now halts for



G.S. Rajans thoughts are often back home. In the last twelve years he has been able to see his family only five times. Though their existence depends on Rajans work.



Workers live in housing that is over-crowded and squalid.



Assaia comes from Afghanistan and lives in a trailer he shares with six other men.



On their day off, the men play a game of soccer in front of the housing units built specifically for immigrant workers.



These Pakistani men sit down for a dinner after a day on construction site. Twelve people share this one small apartment.



the Dubai Creek, a large creek that bisects the Emirates. They drink tea, chat, and laugh. In the surrounding alleys, the Internet cafés do good business. People send email and talk via Skype. Most keep in contact with their families this way. “I have never seen my youngest daughter,” explains Ashraf, a forty-eight year-old Pakistani, whose gaze is fixed on the computer screen. The smell of urine wafts from a nearby bathroom.

Out in the square, people play cricket by the pale light of the street lamps. The gulls fly in their unpredictable path and snap after litter in the water, in which boats rock like cradles. Every Friday, Kaleem and other foreign workers toss bread crumbs to the birds. India is far behind them. Everyone should be like a gull.

the first time. The dredgers have disappeared from the scene. The same goes for most construction projects. The low price of oil creates problems for Dubai. For example, on Palm Island the villas are now worth only \$2,894,000. Everything has its effects and one wonders: is this simply the logical result of megalomania? In Dubai, there will be no bailout. Rather, the Emirates could take this opportunity to reign in their inflated real estate market.

As the banking and commercial metropolis of the East, so much money has been made in Dubai in the past few years that the Emirates know how to deal with the crisis calmly. As the population rapidly grows, building must also continue. The Emirates must take care of their own and the work may not be given to Kaleem and his colleagues.

It's Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, and the construction crew has the day off. Kaleem has come with his buddies to



Most of the men feel like aliens in this city. They call Dubai the city without soul.



This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT Inc.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

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