

SOS FROM TIKRIT

Indian nurses who chased their dream to Iraq are now at the mercy of terrorists and plead to be rescued



KT EXCLUSIVE
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WHEN 46 INDIAN NURSES who had been dreaming about an overseas job finally boarded their flight to Iraq, little did they know their life journey would hit a roadblock in the wilderness of Iraq's war zone.

As battle-hardened members of one of the most ruthless terrorist groups — the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) — rolled into Iraq from the Syrian war space and shocked the world with horrifying pictures of mass executions, thousands of kilometres away the parents of the hapless nurses "under siege" had no one to turn to, except divine intervention.

Life has been a nightmare for the nurses — all from the south Indian state of Kerala — ever since they landed in Tikrit, some a year ago and some just a couple of months back. In a state brimming with high unemployment, getting a job at the Tikrit Teaching Hospital was godsend.

But the money they hoped to earn is yet to materialise. They have not been paid for months, yet the "angels of mercy" clung on to the hope of rescuing their impoverished families back home. But all those dreams have been shattered by the invasion of the ISIL fighters who have captured large swathes of Iraq's territory, including Mosul, Tikrit, Baiji, Jalula, Sadiyah, Mukdadiya and the strategic town of Tal Afar that sits on the main highway between the Syrian border and Mosul.

The city is now almost empty of government loyalists and Iraqi officials. The hospital is now in the crosshairs of the gun-toting terrorists and no one can get in or out of the building. The nurses, who have been holed up in their quarters on the upper floor of the hospital, have been abandoned by the Iraqi military and government officials, who have fled for their lives.

In the first few days of the aggression, the night sky glowed with flames from burning houses as gunshots echoed through the air and bombs shook the hospital building.

What next? Fear hangs over them as reports of a wider conflict and the kidnapping of around 40 Indians working in the city of Mosul filter in through phone calls from India.

"Will we ever be rescued? What if the entire region explodes in a sectarian war? Though food is no problem at the moment, the stock of rice and poultry products will gradually run out," Marina M. Jose, a resident of Kottayam district in Kerala, told *Khaleej Times* from her quarter in the besieged hospital.

"We had run out of tea, milk and water, but thanks

to officials from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the supply has resumed. They have also recharged our phone credits," said Marina who is married with two children. Her husband works in Qatar.

"They don't work anymore, having confined themselves to their living quarters. The only faces they see are of a couple of patients who are sent up for placing IV drip catheters by the two or three trapped doctors."

"Only one floor of the 600-bed hospital is functioning now. Most of the patients are child casualties from the war. We were summoned downstairs a couple of times by officials claiming to be from different ministries."

"We were also called in by a man claiming to be an official from the new administration in the city. But we refused to work as we are sceptical of their intentions," said Marina.

"When we complained we had not been paid for five months, he said 'that's history now'. He said what is lost is lost, but promised to pay if we are ready to work. But who is this official? Is he a representative of the renegade militant group that is tearing Iraq apart?" asked Seeliyamma George who hails from Kasargod district.

"The ugliest thing that has happened in such a life and death situation is we are now a divided lot. Fourteen of us who have completed almost a year here want to go home, while the rest who joined in January want to stay put, come what may," said Sora Joseph, who hails from Ettimamoor in Kottayam district.

"Our contract and residency papers will expire in July, after which we will be illegal. For the last five months we had been paying back what we had borrowed back home. That we could not save anything is a different matter; we need to get out of this hellhole. A storming of the hospitals like the terrorists did in Yemen recently is something we shudder to think."

But those who had started working as recently as in January and not been paid yet, are faced with the fear of having to return to India and straight into the arms of loan sharks from who they have borrowed heavily — nearly Rs 150,000 — to snap up the Tikrit hospital job.

"It's better to die here than going back into a sinkhole of debts," said a nurse who did not want to be identified. "We are ready to be shifted to other hospitals outside the war zone, but there's no one to help us."

Seeliyamma said a divided house has sent a wrong message to the Indian Embassy in Baghdad, diluting their demand to be evacuated. She said New Delhi's slow response to their evacuation request is

probably based on the argument that "if some can stay put, why can't you?"

But Ambassador Ajay Kumar told *Khaleej Times* that embassy officials were doing everything possible to help through voluntary agencies. "We are coordinating with various agencies, including UN and ICRC officials and the Iraqi government. All of them have advocated that staying put in the hospital is the best option as a road trip to Baghdad would be suicidal."

He said once the situation improves, the embassy would help evacuate and fly them home with the help of the central and state governments.

The nurses voiced apprehension about the Indian government's appeal to stay put. "How long do they want us to 'stay put'? They say it's not safe to travel. If the news that the Americans have evacuated their citizens from Tikrit is true, then why can't our government do it?" asked Marina.

"When floods wreaked havoc in Uttarakhand last year, Narendra Modi, as the chief minister of Gujarat, sent a special flight to evacuate pilgrims from his home state. Now as the prime minister of India, it's his duty to evacuate his countrymen trapped in a foreign war zone," Marina argued.

Sources in the Kerala government told *Khaleej Times* the besieged nurses could have been evacuated, but "precious time had lapsed before New Delhi actually acted on our request".

"As soon as we received the SOS from the nurses on the 13th of June, we faxed a message to the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh called the next day to coordinate with Chief Minister Oommen Chandy."

"Unfortunately, the Modi administration was preoccupied with the prime minister's state visit to neighbouring Bhutan, and Sushma Swaraj was also not available as she had accompanied the PM," the source said.

"Don't take it as a blame game. It's understandable that any new administration would take some time to get its act together," the source said, adding the voluntary agencies are also sceptical about transporting an all-woman contingent of refugees."

Chief Minister Chandy told *Khaleej Times* the state government is regularly interacting with the central government on what could be done to alleviate the nurses' difficulties and ultimately evacuate them.

He said his administration immediately made arrangements to start helplines in the embassy in Baghdad and at the Department of Non-Resident Keralites Affairs in Trivandrum. Chandy

said he has appealed to the embassy and other agencies to provide the nurses with basic needs in case their stay gets longer in the event of an extended conflict.

“It's better to die here than going back into a sinkhole of debts. One of the nurses

Shattered families pray for safe return of daughters

IT HAS BEEN a week of prayers for the families of the besieged nurses. Marina's four siblings, two children and parents all wanted her to come back. "No more dreams; our daughter's life is more valuable than money. We just pray for her safe return," father P.A. Jose told *Khaleej Times*, his voice breaking up as he spoke.

Neither the authorities, nor Marina, has an answer when her eight-year-old son and six-year-old daughter ask her on the phone when she will be coming home.

In Kasargod, Seeliyamma's mother, Leelamma George, sobbed when she told *Khaleej Times* that the family had been looking forward to her return on leave for her wedding.

"We were also hurrying to complete the construction of our new house," she said, adding that her daughter had been paying back the huge sum the family had borrowed to pay for the Iraq job. "Uncertainty is the only bank balance now," Leelamma sighed.

She talks to her daughter at least 4-5 times a day and has been praying on her knees for the safety of Seeliyamma, who is the youngest of her three daughters.

In Ettimamoor, parents C. C. Joseph and Celine are relieved that his two girls, Sona and Veena, trapped in the war zone are getting food. "What can we do sitting here except pray for His mercy on our daughters," Joseph told *Khaleej Times*.

Sona and Veena are twins working in the besieged hospital while their eldest sister Dona is working as a nurse in Al Samawah, one of the Iraqi towns that remains peaceful. Joseph had taken a whopping Rs 300,000 loan without interest from the local church to fund his twins' Iraq trip. He has only paid back part of the amount and is saddled with the responsibility of giving three daughters in marriage.

As the nation prays for their safe return, the nurses said they have no words to thank all their well-wishers.

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Rs 300,000

spent by a father to send his twin daughters to Iraq

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Nurse Marina Jose

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months of salary yet to be paid to some nurses