

FREEDOMUNITED



Malaysia: Migrant Workers Aren't Bargaining Chips

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Today, [Freedom United](#) and [Tenaganita](#) are calling on Malaysia's Minister of Human Resources, YB M. Kulasegaran to cancel a dangerous proposal that puts millions of migrant workers at risk of debt bondage.

In December of last year, Kulasegaran announced that he was in favor of employers deducting 20% of migrant workers' salaries in an effort to prevent them from fleeing their workplaces. Freedom United and Tenaganita immediately launched a campaign to stop this plan in its tracks, and [today we are delivering 18,194 petition signatures calling on the Minister to scrap this idea](#).

Kulasegaran has declared a "war against forced labour and human trafficking" in Malaysia, but withholding 20% of migrant workers' wages will put them at greater risk of falling into modern slavery. Many migrant workers are already trapped in debt bondage, unable to pay off exploitative recruitment fees. Kulasegaran's proposal to cut 20% of their pay will make a bad situation worse.

It cannot be a win-win solution, as proposed by the Minister, where migrant workers are said to be able to collect the deducted amount when they leave the country after their work permits have expired under his policy. If the purpose of this policy is to prevent migrant workers from fleeing their workplaces, we should be focusing on the root cause of why workers leave their employment. A significant number of those who flee do so due to exploitative working conditions, which include the withholding of wages, abuse and being overworked.

We heard from the Ministry of Human Resources at the end of May that the government is "in the midst of gathering inputs from relevant stakeholders through series of engagement pertaining to this proposal." However, these consultations do not include civil society organisations working with affected communities, which is vital, should the Ministry be sincerely committed to tackle this issue efficiently.

"In reality, after years of experience working with migrant workers in Malaysia, we are very clear that this proposal would only encourage forced and bonded labour. In fact, it would only further institutionalize bonded labour and violating international labour standards. Over and over again, we have seen increased measures to institutionalize practices that have crippled the rights and dignity of migrants. Today, in the 21st century, Malaysia has created an underclass of workers called migrant workers who are open to extreme forms of exploitation that reflect modern day slavery," said Glorene Das, Executive Director of Tenaganita.

"Our community stands with migrant workers, we value their role in the global economy. We are concerned that this proposed wage deduction puts vulnerable workers at much greater risk of modern slavery," said Joanna Ewart-James, Executive Director of Freedom United. "This policy aims to restrict workers' movement, which goes against fundamental labor rights. Migrant workers who have done nothing wrong do not deserve punishment."

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Today, the Ministry is receiving a clear signal from 18,194 people in Malaysia and around the world that the Minister must scrap the 20% deduction plan. The petition and statement were handed over to the Ministry this morning by Tenaganita, with a request for a follow-up meeting to discuss the proposed policy.

We have the utmost hope that the New Malaysian government would reconsider its strategy and work with us to collaboratively create an environment which genuinely respects, protects, promotes and defends the rights and dignity of all workers, including migrant workers.

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Notes to Editors:

1. Freedom United is the world's largest community dedicated to ending human trafficking and modern slavery. We equip people around the globe with awareness, which we then mobilize into millions of valuable actions to drive real change necessary for a world in which slavery no longer thrives.
2. Freedom United has partnered with 85 organizations globally to effectively and collaboratively drive progress.
3. For more information, visit <https://www.freedomunited.org/>