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## **Dubai and the United Arab Emirates – a ‘paradise’ in construction**

- Analysis of my work as Deutsche-Welle correspondent in the Gulf -

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The Emirates Palace Hotel in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) capital Abu Dhabi was meant to be an icon hotel, much like the Dorchester, Adlon, Raffles or King David. In at least one aspect, it became representative of life in the UAE. Dolphins were shipped from the US to swim off-shore the hotel, in an enclosure in the sea. Several months after their arrival, the dolphins began to exhibit unusual behaviour and have, as one journalist said, "turned violent"! The dolphins have found it difficult to acclimatise to the UAE waters and started to exhibit this abnormal behaviour.

It seems the media scene in the UAE has taken a similar turn to the dolphins. Journalists from all over the world come to the UAE, a new center for broadcast and print media in the Middle East. They are allowed to work on topics that the ruling sheikhs want them to cover, or on international issues, that have little to do with UAE domestic news. The sheikhs may think they can control the media. But more and more it seems the media does not act according to the rulers' plans. In a climate of censorship and repression, the journalists discover sides of Dubai and the UAE rarely seen.

## **1. Dubai and the UAE - Introduction**

The area that today comprises the United Arab Emirates was a British protectorate until 1971. Since the formation of the State, the UAE have transformed from one of the most impoverished regions in the world into one of the richest countries. In 2005 oil revenues accounted for approximately 39 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)<sup>1</sup>. The UAE is ranked among the world's richest countries in terms of per-capita income and GDP per-capita. Trade and tourism are becoming more and more important for its economy.

The country is a federation of seven monarchies. Its political system can be described as a federal presidential elected monarchy. The ruler of Abu Dhabi is the president of the UAE, the head of state, and the ruler of Dubai is the Prime Minister and the head of government. Each of the seven Emirates that make up the UAE enjoys a high degree of independence.

## **2. Media hub**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.menafn.com](http://www.menafn.com), "UAE's GDP Grows 17% to AED443bn", 17 January 2006, accessed 1 May 2008

The UAE tries to position itself as a role model of a modern Arab and Islamic society, a concept that has been labeled as '21st century Arabia'.<sup>2</sup> UAE leaders often declare that they aim to combine Emirati traditions and values with the technologies and challenges of modern times. The UAE have attracted a large number of Arabic and non-Arabic media organisations, most of which are based in Dubai. Among those that have opened branches are the BBC, Deutsche Welle, CNN and Reuters. In addition, Dubai hosts the headquarters of one of the most influential Arabic language news channels, al-Arabiya, and a number of English and Arabic language newspapers. But how free are journalists in reporting and doing their job in Dubai?

### **3. Censorship and propaganda**

While the UAE may offer more press freedom than some neighbouring states like Saudi Arabia or Oman, other Gulf states such as Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait offer a greater room for press freedom and regime criticism.

Although English language newspapers Gulf News and Khaleej Times occasionally publish articles that criticise events that are going on in the country, they never criticise the rulers of the country since it is illegal under UAE Federal Law No. 15 of 1980. Anyone who did so would be immediately deported. Until recently, journalists used to be put into jail for 'criticism of government, rulers and ruling families, and friendly governments'.

In September 2007 Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed al Nahyan, a member of the royal family in Abu Dhabi, announced that henceforth journalists insulting Emirati royalty would no longer be jailed since there were 'other measures' that may be taken against them.<sup>3</sup> He did not specify what other measures he was referring to, but to most journalists in the Emirates it is clear that this would mean immediate deportation, a measure Emirati authorities use whenever they want to get rid of 'troublemakers'.

Self-censorship is also rife in the journalistic community. No matter what is going on in the world or how important it is, page one of the English language newspapers always contains an article about Emirati royalty or at least one of the ruling sheikhs. Although they would not be deported if they published another story on the front cover of the newspaper, the editors know that it would create difficulties for them if they did not keep the peace.

The newly published The National daily tries to distinguish itself from the rest, by covering less mainstream stories, those that could influence public opinion. The London-based Independent is perhaps its role model.

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<sup>2</sup> www.dubai.tv, "21st century Arabia", accessed 15 May 2008

<sup>3</sup> Khaleej Times, "No detaining journalists", 26 September 2007

Not just locally produced content is subject to the fierce information law in the UAE, international broadcasters occasionally encounter interference from Dubai's authorities as well. But this is mainly due to the fact that only a small percentage of news items aired on channels like CNN or Deutsche Welle report on events going on in the UAE and if they do they focus on economic issues. If they did cover local news in a way that would be regarded as insulting by local authorities, they too would face repressions. So, effectively, none of the international broadcasters dares to report on human rights in the Gulf.

In addition, the UAE government actively tries to hold back information from journalists. There is for example the matter of "Itha khadamtani bikhidmak", or "If I do you a favour, you can do me one", which is business as usual across the Arab world. Dubai and Abu Dhabi both lie on the same fault line as the former World Heritage Iranian city of Bam, which was devastated by a 2004 earthquake, killing 20 000 people. According to an anonymous British source, the Emirati Government recently commissioned a study of Dubai and Abu Dhabi's risk of ecological disasters. The researchers found that both cities had a high risk of disasters such as earthquakes occurring in the next 30 years and that most of the cities' buildings – both those already standing and those under construction – would not withstand a major event, such as an earthquake.

But according to [uaeinteract.com](http://uaeinteract.com), the risk of an earthquake in Dubai is less than that of one occurring in London. Of course this is a government website, sponsored by the National Media Council (formerly the Information Ministry), who are themselves notorious spinners of propaganda.

According to my source, the Government convinced the researchers not to publish their findings. As their corporate loyalties lay toward the commissioners of the study, the researchers obliged. If this information is true, it affects all Dubai and Abu Dhabi's 4.5 million inhabitants, privileged and underclass, White, Arab or South Asian. It would also affect investors, tourists and people that do business in the Emirates – people that would not necessarily know that the Government might suppress this sort of information.

The Emirati Government's suppression of information affects not just information that might harm its business activities, but also representations of activities that contravene its moral code. These encompass everything from what would in other countries be considered innocuous such as a stroll down the street, to former taboos that have only in the last few decades been accepted as normal behaviour in the West, such as homosexual relationships and sex before marriage.

The most sensitive issue by far is that of human rights in the UAE. Prostitution, child labour, human trafficking – all these are topics that the UAE government tries to keep out of the news. However, the situation of

the many labourers from South and South East Asia has recently been covered by a number of local newspapers.<sup>4</sup> Of course, if western broadcasters try to compile a report about this issue, we face a lot of difficulties and can only truly pursue the project undercover. But it is exceedingly difficult to go to a labour camp or to construction site with a camera crew and stay unrecognised. Fortunately, there are no restrictions when it comes to writing. In the next section, I will describe the living conditions of labourers in Dubai.

#### **4. A day in the life of a “Hindi”**

Instead of going to work one morning in 2007, around 5000 labourers took to the streets of Dubai, calling for better wages and living conditions. Their demands were modest by Western standards: livable accommodation in addition to the \$200 USD per month that they were paid. At that rate, the workers could not afford accommodation themselves, beyond the labour camps they lived in.

Although the term “labour camp” implies forced labour, such as that found in the Gulag and Nazi Germany, the workers were actually living in the kind of slum apartment blocks that are commonly found in the developing world. The camp that I visited, which is typical, was comprised of unpainted concrete buildings four stories in height set in rows divided by narrow, dingy laneways. Even though the temperature can reach as high as 52 degrees centigrade in summer, the buildings were not air-conditioned. Because of that, the workers often left their doors open, so that you could see inside their crowded lives: up to four people sharing a room that measured a little less than 3 by 4 metres. Each floor had just one room that served as a bathroom and washing facility: it was filthy, very dark and had one tap roughly plumbed in. There was no toilet in the room, only some holes in the floor.

In this camp and others of its kind, you will often see labourers lounging in the alleys between their homes as it is cooler there than outside. The alleys are also where they park their bicycles and air their clothes. Drying clothes dwarf the landscape.

This is just one labour camp out of the many that house the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers that have entered the Emirates over the last ten years. Approximately 1.2 million of them have come from India, and 700 000 from Pakistan, with around 200 000 Filipinos and 70 000 Indonesians, along with many Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans.<sup>5</sup> According to the US State Department’s Report on Human Rights, more than 50 per cent of foreign workers in the UAE come from the Indian subcontinent.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.arabianbusiness.com](http://www.arabianbusiness.com), “Dubai labourers strike over pay”, 28 February 2008, accessed 9 May 2008

<sup>5</sup> [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov), “United Arab Emirates - country reports on human rights practices 2006”, accessed 28 April 2007

Pressure from international human rights groups have prompted the UAE government to amend labour accommodation rules. One of my sources has been heading a design team responsible for designing seven labour cities at the new Dubai Industrial City. "Labour City" is the new nomenclature that the quasi-governmental owners of the development prefer to "Labour Camp". The new accommodation is certainly a significant improvement on existing facilities. However, new challenges faced the designers. While each labourer will now be living in about forty square foot per labourer, the concern was more on how to respond to potential disturbances. In Dubai, a congregation of several people constitutes a demonstration and is an excuse for deportation. A major South African security firm was hired and made significant alternations to the master-plan of the labour cities specifically to make it easier for the army to control any disturbances. So instead of having 25,000 labourers in any one labour city, those cities would only house a maximum of 12,500 labourers. In case of disturbance, the army tanks would roll in and surround the trouble zone.

After the later-2007 labour disturbances, the team headed by my source was asked to alter the labour cities master-plans to show recreational facilities. The designers had little more than 10 hours to complete the task. Logos of well-known fast-food outlets were added to buildings on the master-plans as well as signs showing "Cinema" and "Theatre". The altered master-plan was to be shown to a major international human rights organisation meeting with high ranking Dubai officials. Dubai was showing the world that labourers live in cities where after a game of basketball, they could nip out to a KFC and continue their night at the movies. Of course, the majority of workers are too over-worked to even contemplate stepping into a playing field. Even if they did, they'd prefer cricket. And if they did, they wouldn't be able to afford neither the KFC meal nor the cinema ticket. It was express government propaganda. An interesting change requested was to remove the mosque's picture from the master-plan and show it as a multi-faith hall to show to the international visitors that Dubai respects followers of faiths other than Islam. Of course, given the short notice, the architects managed to remove the minaret from the mosque but forgot to remove the shadow of the minaret from the picture! Whether the new Labour Cities will provide prayer facilities to non-Muslims is yet to be seen.

But although the labourers that have built Dubai come from many countries, Dubai's Arab population calls them "Hindis", as the majority of them are Indian. Although Westerners pay a little more attention to this ignored underclass, they too use generic terms to refer to these people such as "workers", "Indians" and "Pakistanis". In a city that is defined by its enclaves, the labourers move in such different circles that for the average white collar worker, the "Hindis" simply blend into the scenery. The signs that you see at construction sites advertising cheap labour camps to attract investors further emphasise that Dubai's elite see these workers as alien, sub-human and expendable. One important indicator of how efficient a labour camp is for Arab investors building in Dubai is how many labourers the camp fits into a square metre.

Good working conditions mean less profit for the international companies that are building one of the world's fastest-growing cities. Dubai's population grew by 17 per cent in 2006 alone to stands at 1.422 million, according to the previous year's census<sup>6</sup>. Although the Emirates is a vastly rich country, the construction companies refuse to improve their workers' living conditions or pay, saying that the workers have a better deal than in their home countries.

Technically speaking, this is true. In India, many unskilled labourers do not even earn \$1 USD per day. Although large numbers of workers were lured to the UAE with promises of significantly more money than they actually receive, they are still earning a minimum of more than six times than they could back home. A Hindi may be malnourished, but he could be equally so in his home country but not earning the wages that might enable some members of his family to escape poverty. Does this desperation for a better life justify the way South Asian and Asian workers are treated in the Emirates, when it has so much money to spare, however? No. This is just another example of the exploitative attitude, at least partially influenced by racism, demonstrated by many companies that are part of Dubai's building boom.

But back to the demonstration: the latest in a series of futile protests that began earlier this decade. This one was no different. To begin with, the workers' claims were illegal in the Emirates, because they had signed a contract, and had no right to protest under national law. Like they had with other demonstrations, hundreds of police dressed in riot gear and, accompanied by tanks, broke up the protest that same day. By nightfall, the demonstrators had been arrested and placed in detention camps. A week later, none of the so-called 'masterminds' of the protests was left in the country. They had all been deported.

So what of those that remained? How do they live their lives? The average "Hindi" is in his early 20s, unmarried and lives in an industrial quarter of Dubai called "Al-Quoz", which is mostly comprised of factories and labour camps. On the six or seven days a week that he works, he wakes in the dark and dresses in a blue uniform. I say "his", because there are no women living in these camps, or working on building sites, which is one of the biggest reasons why Dubai's population is the most gender-biased in the world: 75 per cent male compared to only 25 per cent female.<sup>7</sup> Our 'Hindi' walks with his coworkers to the nearest assembly point, where buses come to take all the workers to construction sites across Dubai.

As he boards the bus at 5 am, the "Hindi" is given a plastic bag of rice and gravy to last the day. This food is very important, because on the wage

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<sup>6</sup> [www.dubai.ae](http://www.dubai.ae), "population growth", Dubai Statistics Department, accessed 18 April 2008

<sup>7</sup> [www.uaeinteract.com](http://www.uaeinteract.com), "Dubai's population makes big surge", accessed 9 June 2008



that he makes, he would find it difficult to feed himself. It is clear to onlookers that this meagre offering makes up the bulk of his diet. Although their Arab employers justify the way they treat the "Hindis" by saying they have better working conditions in Dubai than back home, there is no question that the standard Indian worker's meal of dhal and rice is more nutritious. But whatever they have been eating, it is clear from their childlike bodies and skeletal faces that it has not been enough for most of their life. The majority of the workers are around 1.6 metres tall, and drowning in uniforms clearly designed for a larger frame. Some are so thin that they are uncomfortable to look at and they smell, like underclasses the world over. When you enter a lift after a labourer, your nose will tell you that he has been there.

Driving by in the early morning desert winds of the Emirates, all you can see are emaciated, dark figures clad in dark blue work clothes and yellow helmets. Their skin is not just dark because of their ethnicities, but because of a life spent working outdoors in harsh conditions. Cheap buses made by Indian automobile company Tata, famous for cutting its costs through eliminating security measures, roll up, driven by other "Hindis", thankful to have escaped more arduous work. Each window is covered with iron bars, protecting the more fortunate from these itinerant workers. There could be no other reason for barring the windows, after all, than to prevent their occupants from escaping. In 2007, one such bus filled with Hindis returning from a day's work collided with a car, blocking the entrance to the bus. Because of the bars, the workers could not escape, and when the bus caught fire, they burned to their deaths.

But no one thinks of that now, an hour before white collar workers begin their daily commute. Instead convoys of Tata Buses dominate the main arterial Sheikh Zayed Road on their way to building sites scattered across the city. Once the labourers arrive and disembark they are led to the latest high-rise construction, where again occupational health and safety is unheard of. There are no safety nets for the labourers that are hoisted up to work on the higher levels, and many workers remove their helmets to get some respite from the heat. They are not professional builders, so how would they know to protect themselves? All of these factors contribute to more labourer deaths per Dubai building site in one month than on a European building site in an entire year.

Why would their privileged employers care what happens to these "Hindi" workers? With approximately 60 000 millionaires in Dubai alone, the Emirates is one of the world's richest countries. A USD \$200-per-month labourer is less than worthless. And for every worker that dies or leaves the country, or goes on strike, there are hundreds that are willing to take their place. Even though the government generously compensates the families of dead labourers by paying them 90 000 Dirhams (approximately 34 000 USD) and three months' wages, this is seen as more convenient than incorporating occupational health and safety standards into one of the fastest-growing cities of modern times.

Of course, international standards are not as prohibitively expensive as all that. But implementing appropriate OH&S (Occupational Health and Safety) procedures would signal a profound shift in the way that Arab companies do business in Dubai, one that might have several after-effects, including paying employees a living wage and ensuring that they are trained to do their job properly. And why would they bother, when in the current economic climate in the Emirates, it is clear that companies have carte blanche to treat their unskilled workers in any way they see fit? This exploitative attitude is one of the core reasons that Dubai's rise to prominence has been so rapid and profound.

Building site accidents are common. In 2008, a scaffold collapsed on a construction site at Dubai Marina, an upmarket residential complex in the centre of what is often referred to as "New Dubai" – where most of the construction is taking place. The two by four kilometre complex includes a yacht harbour, many 5 and 6-star hotels and the Marina Walk, which is always crowded with strollers on the weekends. But despite the Dubai Marina's popularity, when the scaffold collapsed, no one other than the mostly Indian labourers was there to witness it. Twenty-four of them plunged to their deaths.

How much would it cost to set up a construction site according to international standards? Could the 830 400 USD that the Government spent compensating the families of the lost workers, not to mention the money the delayed construction time cost the company involved, be better spent? Would it not be better value to set up the construction site more professionally in the first place? Another factor that would be crucial for companies doing business in the West is the negative publicity that such an incident would trigger. But in the Emirates, this again is business as usual. "Khalas", so what, those driving by would say, and not give it another thought.

But back to our "Hindi." After six hours of work, he breaks for lunch at noon and sits in a group with his coworkers on the site. He opens his plastic bags to eat the rice and gravy – kept warm by the heat of the day – with unwashed fingers. If anyone bothered to watch through the dust, they would once again see these thin blue-clad bodies, this time spooning food methodically to their mouths, some still wearing their plastic helmets. After a half-hour lunch break, he goes back to work during what is the hottest part of the day. He works another five hours, then makes his way to the assembly point by 5pm to catch the bus back to the labour camp.

After work, he will stay in the camp playing cards and games, or go and buy a few items at the special shops for labourers, many of which are located near the camps. These are not like the luxury malls that Dubai is famous for, but more like run-down huts. The items for sale are of limited variety and poor quality, but as his primary objective is to send as much

money back home per month as he possibly can, this doesn't bother him. He can buy cigarettes and toiletries and still save. As you drive through some parts of Dubai, you often see labourers walking the streets holding hands. They are just about the only pedestrians in sight, as everyone else is in an air-conditioned car or taxi.

These labourers will stay an average of three to five years in Dubai, working for the same employer and living in the same labour camp. If work conditions become too difficult, they have no means of trying to improve the situation, as protests and the formation of unions are illegal. It is nigh on impossible for them to change employers, and they cannot leave the country until they have fulfilled their contract, although their employers can discharge them for no reason. The reason for this is that the only way foreigners can get a work visa in the Emirates is to have a sponsor, which can be any UAE national or company. For labourers, their sponsor is the construction company. To employ the labourers, the construction company has to submit a letter of "non-objection", which states the conditions under which the workers will be employed: their wages, their living conditions, medical insurance and the duration of the contract. If a labourer quits his job, his work visa is cancelled and he is immediately deported. There is no opportunity for him to seek other work as his employer holds his passport. The only theoretical way that he could change employers is if he were to leave the country and apply for another work visa. On his monthly salary he simply cannot afford to do this. Although he came here of his own free will, our "Hindi" is little more than an indentured servant. It is an unsettling truth that the playground of the rich and the beautiful has been built with what is virtually slave labour.

## **5. Of highways and enclaves**

Why don't people pay more attention to what is happening to the neglected majority of Dubai's population?

One reason might be that there are few pedestrians besides the labourers in the city, and that there is virtually no public transport, although this will change when Dubai's four-line metropolitan train network is launched in 2009. This is not just due to the heat, but also because walking in public is considered inappropriate behaviour for Arabs, Westerners, and those that Khalijee or Persian Gulf tradition deems "decent people". This is particularly true for "decent" women, who are expected to have a chauffeur to drive them around. After dark, when the city's famous night scene comes to life, walking is more acceptable, but even then only in certain places and generally not alone.

Despite the effect that the stigmatisation of walking in public might have on your level of fitness, it has a more significant outcome – that you pay less attention to your surroundings. People walking past that see a disaster such as a bus crash or building site accident occurring, will stop and gawk, or possibly even offer to help. But in Dubai, people will be driving past such incidents and most likely at speeds of between 100–120 kilometres per hour through the city's maze of tollways and freeways.

They most likely will not notice or, if they do, keep on driving. In Dubai, smart expatriates turn a blind eye to many practices that they might not accept in their home country, while for Arabs another building site disaster is simply the price you need to pay to turn Dubai into not only the hub of the Middle East, but a global metropolis. And no matter what your cultural background is, you're not going to want to be caught in a traffic jam.

While the middle class and moneyed elite insulate themselves from the dirty underbelly of the city, there is no escape into the world's largest shopping malls and most elaborate entertainment complexes for these labourers. They, along with other indentured workers, are even barred from entering shopping complexes, even though this is not always enforced. In one incident in Bur Dubai, one of the more established parts of town, a woman of Indian appearance was detained at Bur Juman Centre shopping mall by security guards who thought she was a housemaid. Although she insisted that she was an Emirati citizen, they did not believe her and wanted to eject her from the centre. Only after she telephoned her Arab husband, who then brought her Emirati passport, was she allowed to stay.

Class differentiations will be perpetuated on Dubai's new train system, the Metro. The first and second class service, Gold Class, will be for Arabs and Westerners, and the third for the mostly South Asian workers, in a practice that is reminiscent of the racial segregation seen in America and South Africa last century. Why is it that the Western world accepts this behaviour in the Emirates, a scant generation after it boycotted apartheid in South Africa? Is the developed world becoming more economic rationalist and less idealistic? Or, as with China, are the Emirates, as one of the more "moderate" Middle Eastern countries, considered so important to global development that it cannot be criticised?

Even the governments of the countries that the indentured labourers come from are reluctant to rise to their defence, because of the important contribution the workers make to their national economies.

Another reason why Westerners and other so-called "decent people" are shielded from the suffering majority is because they live in different areas from where the labour camps are and often work in areas where construction is not taking place, such as Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City or Jebel Ali. The only time that they come into contact with labourers is on the way to and from work, or when construction is underway near where they live.

But sometimes, you can have more intimate contact with a labourer, such as with the one that lives in one of the garages in Dubai Marina. Carrying a bucket full of water, some detergent and a cloth, "Sanjeev" approaches you as you park in the underground car park at night, offering to wash your jeep for a few Dirhams. Like the rest of the "Hindis", he is

severely malnourished, his eyes set deep in his skull. Unlike them, he is smiling to try and drum up custom. He also is one of the few "Hindis" who doesn't have a moustache, something that is considered very attractive on men in his culture. In his stained blue uniform, Sanjeev quickly sets to work as you take your shopping to the elevator. You can pay him when you return, it doesn't matter. He'll always be there, because your garage is also where he sleeps: on a mat in the corner. From his sleeping spot, he doesn't just see the cars of the privileged, but also their luxury, high-rise apartments through a gap in the ramp.

Because most of Dubai is so newly built, the many gated communities that comprise it are instantly distinguishable from one another. Westerners and other well-off internationals can move into the lavish "Emirates Hills", where Benazir Bhutto lived in exile; the more affordable "Arabian Ranches", popular with partnered yuppies, and the "Green Community", where many young Westerners on relatively low incomes of around \$3000 USD per month live. Many expatriate Arabs can be found in the neighboring city of Sharjah, where rents are significantly lower, as they do not make as much money as their Western counterparts.

Meanwhile, much of the local Emirati population live in family homes in Jumeirah, a beachside district located between New Dubai and the older part of town. Jumeirah is unusual for two reasons: firstly because there are no apartment buildings there, only houses. In addition, foreigners are not allowed to own property, although many choose to rent there because of its convenient beachside location.

Although Jumeirah itself is an established area in Dubai, it still has not been around for very long. Much of the building took place in the 1990s, with the government giving Emiratis blocks of land and the funding to build houses there.

The Asians and South Asians that don't work on construction sites also have their own areas. Bur Dubai is a primarily Indian-occupied central district on the Western side of Dubai Creek, a large inlet that comes into the city from the Persian Gulf. The Indians primarily work in service industries: driving taxis, owning small companies, keeping shops that sell electronics and similar goods. At \$500 to \$800 USD per month, their wages are much lower than everyone else except for their labourer fellow nationals, but they earn enough to maintain a decent lifestyle, if they are frugal and share accommodation. The apartments here are still crowded, however with a typical two-room flat being home to four people. More recently single, young Westerners have started moving to Bur Dubai, attracted by the cheaper rents.

On the Eastern part of Dubai Creek you find Deira, a primarily business district that is also the oldest part of Dubai. Because of that, there is a little less homogeneity in the type of housing that is offered. Yuppie apartment blocks can be found next door to the more modest flats that

Indians can afford to rent. The traffic is overwhelming, but despite that, traces of Old Dubai still remain. Traditional wooden boats or "Abrams", take people from one side of the "creek" to the other for one Dirham. It is the only part of Dubai where you can walk the streets and go into shops, as you would in most other cities in the world. Walking along Deira's promenade, by the creek you find the closest thing to a cultural melting pot in an almost entirely manufactured city.

In the rest of Dubai, it is easy for foreigners to lose a sense of place, driving as they do from one part of town to the other: from their apartment to the office, to the ubiquitous shopping mall where they can go to the gym, the cinema, to restaurants or to access all other types of entertainment available. But it is rare for you to leave the concrete jungle. Although there are parks in Dubai, they are difficult to get to, thanks to the ever-present traffic jams. If driving to a park takes an hour of your time in sluggish conditions, you expect a very impressive park for your inconvenience. But Arab parks are full of the kinds of architectural adventures that Westerners do not find attractive, such as giant teapot fountains, concrete cannons, and portraits of sheikhs. They are not designed for Westerners, and neither is the climate. Many Western expatriates simply find Dubai too hot to spend much time outside. So they stay inside their cars, inside their homes and offices and malls, their enclaves and do not see how Dubai treats the rest of its population.

## **6. Illegal aliens**

According to the outdated information found on government website [uae.gov.ae](http://uae.gov.ae), the Emirates' population is 2.94 million. This is supposed to include foreigners working in the country, but comes nowhere near to the truth. As with neighbouring Saudi Arabia, Emirates rulers are very reluctant to share information and even more enthusiastic about controlling it. Censorship and propaganda are a daily fact of life. A closer reading of what the actual population of the Emirates might be can be taken from the 2005 Census, which reported that the population was 4.44 million. Even this is a vast understatement, however, not just because of the population growth since then, but because of the vast number of illegal aliens living there. Not to mention the people who are staying on tourist visas while they look for work, or even while they work. 80 per cent of the Emirates' population are not citizens, which makes it even easier for the government to control their lives, as they have fewer legal rights.

But first, back to Sanjeev. He is staying illegally in Dubai, after escaping his labouring contract. Despite his smile, it is very difficult for him to make a living, and also very dangerous. He is still earning around the same as he did as a labourer, but now he no longer has a residency permit. If caught by the police, he will be arrested, jailed and eventually deported and banned from ever returning to the country. Life may be difficult in Dubai, but it is still the best possible hope for Sanjeev and the other "Hindis" to make money for their families back home. In India, there is no hope for an unskilled worker like him. There is also no way for Sanjeev

and other illegal aliens to leave the Emirates, as although Westerners can leave via Oman, the only way out of the country for Asians and South Asians is via the UAE's international airports. Once again, Sanjeev would be immediately detained if he tried that.

Life as an illegal alien in Dubai is very difficult. Although they may have friends in a similar condition, there are no support networks set up for these people. If they get sick, there is no chance of seeing a doctor. They cannot open a bank account or rent accommodation as in the Emirates you need to show your residency permit to do any of these things. As a result, either the illegals live in public places, or, if they are lucky to earn enough, they can find shared accommodation with someone who has a residency visa.

Officially illegal aliens do not exist, but you can still see them sleeping in parks and blending in with the other labourers in the streets. Sanjeev is not the only illegal alien to wear the blue uniform that was part of his former life as a legal resident. He is just one of the hundreds of thousands of people that are not counted in the census and give lie to Dubai's official estimated population of 1.2 million. It is no surprise to anyone who lives there, or has been caught up in its traffic jams. Dubai is simply too large a city, both in its size and numbers of people, to have such a small population.

In June 2007, hope emerged for Sanjeev and other illegal aliens trapped in Dubai when the Emirati Government announced that there would be a three-month amnesty for people who were working illegally to leave without penalty<sup>8</sup>. In this case, "without penalty" meant that the UAE government, would not fine or arrest people wishing to leave the country during the amnesty period. People were also given the opportunity to register with the government and obtain a legitimate work permit to be able to stay.

According to [workpermit.com](http://workpermit.com), at least 300 000 people were in the Emirates illegally when the amnesty was first announced, most of these working as semi-skilled or unskilled labourers. The majority of these came in under either work or tourist visas and then overstayed when they expired. Unlike previous amnesties in 1996 and 2003, where 150 000 and 100 000 labourers left respectively, the penalties for the latest amnesty were greater. An automatic ten-year ban on re-entering the Emirates would apply to anyone who did not register with the government during this time. They would also face jail time and fines, followed by deportation. And for the first time, employers of illegals faced steep fines and the possibility of jail time if they continued to employ undocumented workers once the amnesty was over.

Because of this, the amnesty was so popular that it had to be extended

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<sup>8</sup> "Time extended for illegal migrants to leave Dubai under amnesty", 30 August 2007 <http://workpermit.com>, accessed 8 February 2008

for another two months to deal with the vast numbers of applications. By mid-August, more than 110 000 illegals had applied to leave the country, another 50 000 tried to legalise their status through new jobs and visas, while others had simply taken advantage of the amnesty period to leave the country. In particular, the Indian consulate in Dubai was flooded with applicants. Many labourers were unable to obtain flights out of the country, either because flights were booked out, or because they could not afford to buy a ticket to leave. Some tried to book a cheaper boat to Iran, an illegal trip as they also required a visa, which Iran would be highly unlikely to grant under the circumstances. Some airlines offered free or discounted airfares for labourers who needed to leave, as did both the UAE and the Indian governments.

Similar to many UAE initiatives, however, the amnesty was not as clear-cut as it seemed. People who were deemed "infiltrators" were hit with a ten-year ban on re-entering the Emirates, according to a policy that was released during the amnesty itself. The term "infiltrator" was not defined, but it included at the very least anyone who entered the UAE without a visa of any sort, for example through human trafficking, as well as people who had engaged in "illegal activity". As with "infiltrator" the term "illegal activity" was also not specifically defined, but would encompass actions that are not considered criminal behaviour in most other countries, such as adultery. The police also fingerprinted and photographed applicants to check if they were wanted in relation to a criminal case in the UAE, in their home country or by Interpol.

One positive outcome of the amnesty was an increase in the demand for labor, which saw thousands of illegal workers being given the right to stay in the country. Because of this shortage, some businesses were even offering higher wages and better treatment to their workers. Hopefully this will continue in the future.

Just under 279 0000 illegal workers used the amnesty to either leave the country or legalise their status<sup>9</sup>. Of the latter, 50,000 were Indian workers<sup>10</sup>. The numbers involved were more than that of the two previous amnesties combined.

This time the government wanted to do more than contain the situation, however. Towards the end of the amnesty, it announced that it would open recruitment offices in India and the Philippines, and bypass the recruitment agencies. The offices would also educate potential workers about UAE labour laws and customs so that they knew what to expect.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [www.dubaichronicle.com](http://www.dubaichronicle.com), "Amnesty causes shortage of housemaids in the UAE", 9 September 2007, accessed 8 February 2008.

<sup>10</sup> [www.khaleejtimes.com](http://www.khaleejtimes.com), "UAE labour offices to open in Delhi, Manila", Arafa, A., 23 October 2007, accessed 8 February 2008.

<sup>11</sup> [www.khaleejtimes.com](http://www.khaleejtimes.com), "UAE labour offices to open in Delhi, Manila", Arafa, A., 23 October 2007, accessed 8 February 2008



## **7. Recruitment drives: Your passport is our property**

As the self-proclaimed "city of the future", Dubai seems like a city where the streets are paved with gold to potential Asian and South Asian guest workers. Many of the labourers currently working in Dubai were recruited by agents that promised them well-paying jobs and brought them in under visit visas or temporary work permits. Some Indians borrowed up to \$3000 to pay the recruiters to take them to these exciting, well paid jobs in Dubai. Unfortunately many arrived to find the pay significantly less than promised, while some were sent to jobs that were very different to the ones they had signed up for.

To protect their investment, and ensure the loyalty of their workers, it has been common in the past for both legal and illegal workers in the UAE to have their passports held by agents to prevent them from seeking other work or leaving. Hopefully this will change after a 2007 directive issued by the government that states agents and employers may not withhold a passport from anyone who asks for theirs back. In August 2007, around 47 agents in Dubai were under investigation for breaching this directive. Gulf News made a report on the illegality of keeping passports of Employers. However, I was traveling to a conference in Spain in late 2007. On the same flight were British reporters who work for Gulf News. They told of their need to have their passport released by Gulf News in order for them to travel to cover the conference. Gulf News seems not to appreciate the irony of this – they reported about the illegality of holding employees' passports while themselves holding the passports of their own employees.

## **8. Other issues**

Closely related to the situation and the living conditions of Dubai's labourers is the question of other human rights issues. Dubai is not only becoming a new hub for media, trade and tourism, but at the same time for human trafficking and prostitution. Again, the government denies the problem, saying these phenomena do not exist. That means that prostitutes and trafficked people are denied any basic rights they may have in other countries of a similar developmental stage. But as long as UAE leaders see the media, whether domestic or foreign, as a mouthpiece of the government and reject the idea of a fourth estate and checks and balances, there will be little improvement in the human rights situation in Dubai and the whole of the UAE.

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