

Increasingly, Nepalis working abroad go home in coffins

By Martha Mendoza
The Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal — A tiny young woman crouches just outside the airport, crying softly into her thin shawl. It's cold, but her sleeping toddler is warm in her arms.

Travellers swarm around — Himalayan trekkers load up expedition backpacks. A Chinese tour group boards a bus. A dozen flight attendants in crisp blue suits and heels click by.

Saro Kumari Mandal, 26, covers her head completely, a bundle of grief.

Hundreds of young Nepali men wave goodbyes. On this day, 1,500 fly out of the Kathmandu airport for desperately needed jobs, mostly in Malaysia, Qatar, or Saudi Arabia. But on this day, too, six come back in wooden caskets, rolled out of baggage claim on luggage carts.

Scrawled in black marker on one: "Human Remains, Balkisun Mandal Khatwe." Saro's husband.

The number of Nepali workers going abroad more than doubled after the country began promoting foreign labor in recent years: from about 220,000 in 2008 to about 500,000 in 2015. The number of deaths among those workers has risen much faster. One out of every 2,500 workers died in 2008; last year, one out of every 500 died, according to an Associated Press analysis of data released by Nepal's Ministry of Labour and Employment.

In total, more than 5,000 workers from the small country have died working abroad since 2008 — more than the number of U.S. troops killed in the Iraq War.

The causes are often listed as natural death, heart attack, or cardiac arrest — the men go to bed after an exhausting day of work and never wake up. That's what Saro was told happened to Balkisun.

Now medical researchers say these deaths fit a familiar pattern: Every decade or so, dozens, or even hundreds, of seemingly healthy migrant Asian workers start dying in their sleep. It happened in the U.S. in the late 1970s, in Singapore about a decade later, and more recently in China. The suspected killer even has a name: Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome.

Next year, an international consortium is launching an investigation. For today's arrivals, they're too late.

About 10 percent of Nepal's 28 million residents work abroad. They send back more than \$6 billion a year, 30 percent of the country's revenues. Only Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are more dependent on



foreign earnings.

"Nepalese workers are well known for their hard work, dedication, and loyalty," boasts the Nepalese Embassy website in Doha, Qatar, where a construction boom employs about 1.5 million migrants from many countries. The "comparatively cost-effective" Nepali workers are experienced at "working in the extreme climatic conditions," says the embassy.

Nepalis build highways, stadiums, and houses in Gulf states and guard shopping malls, sew sweatshirts, and assemble televisions in Malaysia. Anyone who has bought imported sportswear or electronics, or who plans to go to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, may be using the products of their labor.

The migrants pay recruiters about \$1,100 for the jobs. If they're not tricked out of their earnings — and some are — they can send home about \$300 a month.

Department of Foreign Employment spokeswoman Rama Bhattarai said some deaths are inevitable: "They die as foreign employees, they die here when a bus goes off a cliff."

Balkisun's body arrives on an 8:00pm flight. He died in his sleep six weeks after he left Nepal, at 26, to help build highways as part of World Cup infrastructure improvements, said his Qatar-based Habtoor Leighton Group supervisor, Ganesh Khang Mandal.

At the airport, the casket slides easily into a custom-welded coffin rack on one of 10 trucks Nepal's government provides to bring bodies back to villages.

Saro and her three-year-old son jolt around the backseat for a precarious, eight-hour journey home to Belhi village.

The family is marginalized in every way: Ethnically, they're from the "untouchable" caste, and they speak Maithili, a language more common in India, a few miles south. They live eight to a room in a mud-and-stick home among sparse rice paddies. A shared cellphone is passed from house to house. Chronically hungry, they survive on less than \$1 a day.

When the truck reaches Belhi, hundreds of women in traditional saris, men in work clothes, and children pour into the narrow

RISKY BUSINESS. Mohammed Tohit, 28, holds his passport in front of the solid, cement-and-plaster home built for his family in Belhi village, Nepal. Tohit is the envy and inspiration of the village. He worked in Malaysia for almost six years, sewing clothes for Nike, Lacoste, and Columbia Sportswear, saving more than \$20,000 — enough to buy the sturdy two-bedroom house. In the bottom photo, relatives and villagers carry the coffin of Balkisun Mandal Khatwe at Belhi village in Saptari district, Nepal. Balkisun, who had been working for Habtoor Leighton Group in Qatar for less than a month, died in his sleep. (AP Photos/Niranjan Shrestha)

dirt street, tears streaming down their faces. Some stand on rooftops. Others crowd a balcony.

Mohammed Tohit, 28, watches from across the street. He is the envy and inspiration of his neighbors: Six years of sewing for Nike, Lacoste, and Columbia Sportswear in Malaysia helped him buy a sturdy, cement two-bedroom house, a small farm, a cow, a goat, and a television set. He's soon leaving for Saudi Arabia.

"I am scared, sure," he said, "but I have no way to earn anything here."

What causes deaths like Balkisun's? Medical journals associate Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome with genetics, infection, and nutritional deficiencies. In Nepal, authorities say it could be stress, a changed diet, even homesickness, brought on by physically demanding jobs in extremely hot climates.

Utah State University professor Ron Munger studied Thai migrant workers after hundreds died in their sleep in Singapore. He said the Nepali deaths "sound like exactly the same thing."

While the causes of previous strings of deaths haven't been pinpointed, fatalities dropped in each case when workplace safety, housing, and diet improved.

Cardiac epidemiology researcher Nirmal Aryal at the University of Otago in Wellington, New Zealand, recently published "A Call for Public Health Action" in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health* about the deaths. He's organizing an international collaboration to investigate.

At Balkisun's village, his wife falls screaming and crying onto the road and is carried inside. About 50 men carry his body to a river on a bamboo platform.

His young son is purified, dipped naked in the river. He's wrapped in white cloth. And with his uncles' hands guiding his own, he takes a bundle of burning twigs and lights his father's funeral pyre.

Associated Press journalists Binaj Gurubacharya, Niranjan Shrestha, and Janak Raj Sapkota in Nepal, Eileen Ng in Malaysia, and Adam Schreck in the United Arab Emirates contributed to this story.

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Wham!'s influence felt in China after landmark 1985 concert

By Louise Watt
The Associated Press

BEIJING — George Michael's death brought back memories in China of the heady 1980s when Wham! was the first major western band to play in the country after the death of Mao Zedong and decades of cultural isolation.

Many Chinese who had never even heard of the band lined up for hours to buy \$1.75 tickets to the groundbreaking April 1985 concert at the People's Gymnasium, the biggest stadium in Beijing at the time.

Inside the 12,000-strong stadium, seated spectators watched in bewilderment as Michael and Andrew Ridgeley danced in big-shouldered jackets with bleached and feathered hair. The backing dancers' strapless costumes and polka-dot miniskirts also stunned the audience in China at a time when people still dressed in similar shades of green and gray.

"It was the first time a western

band had come to China, everyone was ready to make some noise and stand," said Li Ji, a restaurant owner who went to the concert in his 20s. "But there were so many police officers there, people didn't dare to."

Wham!'s manager, Simon Napier-Bell, spent 18 months persuading the Chinese government to let them in and secure their place as one of the world's biggest bands by telling them it would help them attract foreign investment.

The police warned spectators to stay seated, worried they would be unable to control the crowds and there might even be riots. Some young Chinese who got up to dance were hauled away by security officers.

The Wham! concert influenced Chinese musicians, who had never seen electric guitars played on stage and began to get interested in rock 'n' roll.

Huang Wen, a music writer, said the performance had an impact on

big-name musicians, including the godfather of Chinese rock, Cui Jian. "In the early 1980s, pop songs from Hong Kong were very popular in mainland China and after the concert, college students and people in the music industry started to get interested in rock 'n' roll," she said.

Li said the army department that his parents worked for had given out tickets as a benefit. He attended the concert along with his parents' colleagues and their kids.

"I remember there was a little incident during the concert, the main lights went out because there was a problem with the electricity, so the bassist danced a little break dance," Li said. "It was the first time people saw that and it was so popular, people liked it."

State media said the concert "was a sensation."

While young Chinese today don't know the names George Michael or

Continued on page 6

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