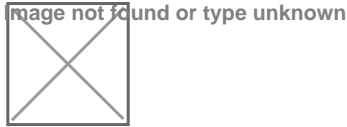


WORLD'S TOP GLOVEMAKER VOWS CLEAN-UP AS MIGRANT WORKERS TOIL IN MALAYSIA FACTORIES

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KLANG: Malaysian firm Top Glove, the world's largest glovemaker, vowed on Thursday to clean up its labour supply chain and workplace practices after cases were uncovered of migrants toiling for long hours to pay off huge debts.

The firm, a major supplier of medical and rubber gloves to 195 countries including Britain and the United States, employs over 11,000 migrant workers, from countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and India.

At some of its factories outside the Malaysian capital, workers told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that they often work long hours to earn overtime pay, and in some cases exceed the limit of overtime hours stipulated under local labour laws.

Workers interviewed said they hoped to quickly repay loans of at least 5,000 Malaysian ringgit (\$1,200) they took out to pay recruitment agents in their home countries. They said others were charged up to 20,000 Malaysian ringgit.

Top Glove is not alone in hiring migrants who pay agents to secure a job. The practice is common across all Malaysian sectors which hire workers from overseas.

Top Glove said it was not aware of its labour suppliers charging exorbitant fees to migrant workers but vowed to investigate and sever ties with unethical recruitment agents.

"We will want to stop dealing with such suppliers if we know they are very unscrupulous. It's our duty to do that, we will never condone it," the company's managing director Lee Kim Meow told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We need workers, no doubt, but we will not stoop so low to support people who exploit workers," he said in an interview at the company's office in Klang, an industrial area outside the capital Kuala Lumpur.

OVERTIME WORK

High recruitment fees are a common plight faced by the nearly two million registered migrant workers in Malaysia, which relies heavily on foreign labour in industries from plantations and construction to manufacturing.

The United Nations' International Labour Organization has said these debts could trap workers in bondage, and businesses have come under pressure in recent years to clean up their labour supply chains.

Migrant workers at Top Glove said they were paid at least 1,000 Malaysian ringgit a month, Malaysia's minimum wage, and given access to their passport under a locker system that had been advocated by local rights groups.

But they work a lot of overtime to earn enough to pay off their debts. Workers at the factory clock 90 to 120 hours of overtime work a month, according to documents seen by the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Under Malaysian laws, workers should be given a rest day each week and work not more than 104 hours of overtime a month.

"If I don't work these extra hours, how could I possibly earn enough?" said a Nepali, who declined to use his name out of fear for his job.

He borrowed a \$1,100 loan from a moneylender with a three percent interest rate every month to pay his agent in Nepal.

Top Glove said it has rolled out a "shift pattern change" since March across its 40 factories to ensure workers get adequate rest.

"Denitely this is an area where we will have to pay attention," Top Glove's deputy human resources head Loke Kean Mun said, adding that the measures are in place to "overcome all this excessive overtime".

"This is where we denitely have to enforce and tighten up (across all factories)," he added at the interview.

WORLD'S GLOVE CAPITAL

Malaysia has become the world's glove capital, and produces three out of every ve pairs used in the world, according to the Malaysian Rubber Glove Manufacturers Association.

Top Glove, which produces 60.5 billion gloves each year, is the world's leading glove manufacturer followed by other Malaysia-based rms like Hartalega, Kossan and Supermax.

Malaysia's new government, which came to power in May on promises to reform - ousting a long-ruling, corruption-mired coalition - has vowed to improve conditions for migrant workers.

Without referring to any specic rms, Human Resources Minister M. Kulasegaran told the Thomson Reuters Foundation this week that major companies in the country must take the lead to ensure there are no labour abuses.

"The big companies must take it upon themselves to be more strict in enforcing these rules," said Kulasegaran, a veteran lawyer who grew up on a rubber estate and has championed worker's rights prior to his appointment.

"We will prosecute if there are any wrongdoings." -- Thomson Reuters Foundation

