

GI SPECIAL 7D20:



**Traitors At Work:
Iraqi Refugee Fired For
Testifying On Capitol Hill That
U.S. Government Ignored Theft
Of At Least \$9 Billion In
Taxpayer Dollars:**

Some Went To Insurgents Who Killed American Soldiers: “The Iraqi Government Is A Group Of Criminal People Who Were Supported By The Bush Administration. I Came Here To Tell American People The Truth” How Washington Sabotaged Iraq's Corruption Cop

By David Corn, May/June 2009 Mother Jones [Excerpts]

In March 2003, Salam Adhoob, a prominent lawyer in the Iraqi city of Suwayrah, was glad to see US forces roll into his country.

Iraqis, he felt, would be able “to rebuild our country again.” But when he saw looters ransack Baghdad's National Museum on TV, he began to worry that the authorities could not protect his nation's public resources.

In the ensuing months, he was horrified as corruption ran rampant amid the post invasion chaos. So when he was asked, in 2004, to join the Commission on Public Integrity (CPI), an independent Iraqi government agency charged with investigating official corruption, Adhoob enthusiastically accepted.

He was soon pursuing high-ranking officials — as well as, in some cases, American contractors — involved in bribery, kickback schemes, oil smuggling, procurement fraud, and other wrongdoing.

Eventually he became the country's chief corruption investigator, overseeing 100 staffers who handled thousands of cases.

“Now I could protect public money and help make the country work,” he recalls.

“He was a Boy Scout,” says James Mattil, a former chief of staff for the Office of Accountability and Transparency, a small unit in the US Embassy assisting the CPI.

“He strictly enforced the law, regardless of whose toes he stepped on.” An Iraqi minister, Adhoob recounts, once tried to buy him off by offering up jobs for his family. “I told him, ‘I am in your office because I have a case. I just want you to allow me to do my work.’”

Today, two years after escaping Iraq amid death threats, the soft-spoken 45-year-old lives with his wife and their four children in a modest brick rambler (on loan from a local church) in a Washington suburb.

Adhoob has no income.

He'd landed a job as an Arabic instructor for the State Department, but was terminated after testifying on Capitol Hill that the US government has ignored the theft of at least \$9 billion in US taxpayer dollars — some of it funneled to insurgents who killed American soldiers.

He feels betrayed by the US government, in whose promises he once placed such hope.

His tale illustrates the tremendous difficulty of establishing the rule of law in Iraq—and the lack of commitment by the US to stamp out corruption.

Adhoob and his colleagues didn't lack for work. “For investigators at the FBI or Customs, a \$2 million case is a significant case,” says Kenneth McNamara, a former US Customs agent who worked with Adhoob. “For CPI, these were almost throwaway cases. They went after cases involving hundreds of millions, if not billions, of embezzled dollars.”

The administration of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a target of many of the CPI's probes, issued numerous orders obstructing the commission's investigations.

In response, staffers held a one-day strike, and Adhoob led a demonstration in front of parliament. “I thought this was one of the best instances of democracy taking root,” says Mattil. Adhoob and the CPI, McNamara says, were “the only shining light of honesty within the Iraqi government.”

In the spring of 2007, the Maliki administration ordered the head of CPI, Judge Radhi al-Radhi, to fire Adhoob, according to Mattil, but Radhi refused.

Worse, Adhoob and Radhi were receiving death threats. As McNamara notes, Adhoob was going after targets who “had their own militias. He was a marked man. There were late-night knocks on his door.” Some evenings, Adhoob slept in his office rather than risk the trip home.

At times, he even needed armed guards at his Green Zone apartment.

“The Green Zone was the center of the corruption,” he explains.

Adhoob's fears were well warranted. Thirty-two of the CPI's 200 employees had been killed. Adhoob's father-in-law, who had furtively ferried him about Baghdad, was murdered.

And a few months after Maliki asked for Adhoob's dismissal, Mattil says, the US Embassy confirmed a report obtained by the CPI that a death squad had been organized to take care of the government's political enemies — including CPI officials.

Around this time, a group of American former law enforcement officers tasked with training CPI investigators asked the head of the US Embassy's accountability office, Art Brennan, to protect Adhoob and Radhi.

The State Department, they said, had declined to help.

That upset Brennan, a Republican retired judge from New Hampshire, who was already worried that senior officials, including Ambassador Ryan Crocker, were not truly committed to addressing corruption in the Iraqi government.

After all, he notes, much of the embassy's staff was busy trying to build good relations with many of the same politicians Adhoob was investigating.

“We were advising officials like Salam, teaching them how to investigate within the rule of law,” Brennan remarks.

“They were actually doing it at great risk to themselves and their families, and no one in the State Department was really serious about it.”

That summer, when Radhi was in the United States for training sessions, Maliki ousted him as CPI chief.

Radhi decided to stay in America — where he publicly compared the Maliki administration to the Mafia and declared that government officials had stolen more than \$12 billion. With Radhi gone, Adhoob says, Maliki's office again ordered the CPI to fire him.

At the time, Adhoob was working several big cases — from a Maliki aide suspected of embezzling school-construction money to a relative of a high-ranking defense ministry official who had managed to obtain \$1.2 billion in military contracts, many of which weren't fulfilled. Stripped of his job, Adhoob would not be able to pursue any of this.

And he and his family would have to move out of the Green Zone, becoming easy targets for the assassins.

Adhoob holed up in a trailer in the US Embassy compound while his friends worked the byzantine process necessary to win him a US visa. After several weeks, word finally came: Can you be ready to leave Iraq in the next 90 minutes? The family grabbed their possessions and hurried to the airport.

Once in the US, Adhoob and Radhi applied for asylum.

But senior US Embassy officials sent out emails directing staff not to write letters in support of their asylum request — to avoid, Brennan says, annoying the Maliki administration.

“This was treachery to me,” says Brennan. “They knew Radhi and Salam were in great danger.”

The asylum requests were granted nonetheless. Adhoob says he'd expected to get a job with the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, the US military unit investigating American corruption in Iraq. But SIGIR chief Stuart Bowen Jr. says that Adhoob was never promised employment, though he has "continued to meet with SIGIR agents and to provide information on a significant ongoing case."

"Sad to say," remarks a former embassy official, "Salam became just another Iraqi émigré."

Last June, Adhoob did get a job as an Arabic instructor for the Foreign Service Institute. But his troubles weren't over.

On September 22, he testified about Iraqi government corruption before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. Adhoob told the senators that "based on the cases that I have personally investigated, I believe that at least \$18 billion have been lost in Iraq through corruption and waste, more than half of which was American taxpayer money."

He cited specific instances of sleaze: \$24.4 million spent on an electricity project that existed only on paper; a front company run by the brother-in-law of a Ministry of Defense official being paid \$4.5 million for the same helicopters that were purchased for \$1.5 million just a few years earlier; and Iraqi ministries' fraudulently paying contractors for "phantom projects."

He also maintained that an American company had delivered only one-third of the 510 Humvees it had been paid to supply the Iraqi military. (In mid-February, Adhoob notes, a SIGIR investigator informed him that this case was close to producing an indictment.)

Coming in the midst of an economic collapse and a red-hot presidential campaign, the hearing caused little stir.

Still, Adhoob's superiors apparently noticed.

The next day, he says, his supervisor at the Foreign Service Institute told him that higher-ups wanted to talk about his Capitol Hill appearance. Adhoob demurred, saying his testimony was unrelated to his job. Soon afterward, he was notified that the institute would not renew his contract.

Ironically, at the time Adhoob was providing language instruction to Joseph Stafford, the former US ambassador to Gambia, who was preparing to serve as the new anti-corruption coordinator at the US Embassy in Baghdad.

In a reference letter, Stafford later praised Adhoob as a "superb language instructor" and hailed him for having "battled heroically against corruption."

(A spokeswoman for the institute said she could not discuss Adhoob's case.)

Art Brennan says he feels "very embarrassed by how Salam has been treated by the government."

For him, Adhoob's plight symbolizes much of the United States' post invasion endeavor in Iraq: noble rhetoric undermined by neglect and hypocrisy.

Mattil concurs. “Salam's story,” he says, “contradicts the claims that Prime Minister Maliki has the political will to fight corruption and calls into question the whole mission in Iraq.”

(In the fall of 2007, Mattil was relieved of duty a day after appearing for a formal interview with congressional investigators probing Iraqi corruption.

He has since filed a whistleblower complaint against the State Department.)

With Adhoob and Radhi gone, the Maliki government has had an easier ride. Last fall, Maliki summarily fired inspectors general in various ministries.

“The corruption problem in Iraq is worse than it's ever been since the invasion,” says SIGIR's Bowen.

Pacing barefoot in his barely furnished living room clad in a dark sweater and pleated black trousers, Adhoob says he likes his new neighborhood, and his kids are enjoying the local schools.

But he's worried about the future—he's been told he can only stay in the house until the end of the year—and haunted by the cases he can no longer pursue. Holding a folder with documents pertaining to his unfinished investigations, he says,

“Sometimes I can't sleep because of all this crime. Americans and Iraqis died because of this corruption.

“The Iraqi government is a group of criminal people who were supported by the Bush administration. I came here to tell American people the truth.”

He pauses before adding, “No one here cares.”

**POLITICIANS CAN'T BE COUNTED ON TO HALT
THE BLOODSHED**

**THE TROOPS HAVE THE POWER TO STOP THE
WARS**

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

Rocket Attacks Target Foreign Troops In Guldara; Casualties Not Announced

28 April (AKI)

Two rockets targeted foreign troops based at a NATO camp outside the Afghan capital Kabul on Tuesday. Twenty Italian soldiers were based at the camp, which is under French command, but the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force did not confirm whether there had been any casualties from the operation, which it said occurred in the village of Guldara.

ENOUGH OF THIS SHIT; ALL HOME NOW



A U.S. soldier of 3rd Platoon Cherokee Troop from the 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division checks a water channel under a road during a patrol in Logar province April 13, 2009. REUTERS/Ahmad Masood

CIA Drone Down In Orgun-E

April 27 (KUNA)

An unmanned aerial vehicle of the US troops crashed in southeastern Afghanistan, the military said in a statement.

Military officials at the US Bagram base said that the aerial vehicle crashed shortly after take-off in Paktika province on Sunday.

“The drone experienced mechanical difficulties shortly after it was launched in the Orgun-E district. The site of the crash was located and secured immediately by the Afghan National Police,” said the statement.

The CIA-operated spy planes are used to target militants in the tribal areas of Pakistan, particularly the Waziristan tribal agency, located close to the border with Afghanistan.

**IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESISTANCE
END THE OCCUPATIONS**

TROOP NEWS

**THIS IS HOW OBAMA BRINGS THE TROOPS
HOME:
BRING THEM ALL HOME NOW, ALIVE**



The remains of U.S. Army Private First Class Richard A. Dewater of Topeka, Kan., Dover Air Force Base, Del., next to another containing the remains of U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl Ray A. Spencer of Los Angeles, on the lift on the tarmac, April 18, 2009 in Dover. Spencer and Dewater died in Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom.
(AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

FORWARD OBSERVATIONS



“At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.

“For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.

“We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”

Frederick Douglass, 1852

**“Hope for change doesn't cut it when you're still losing buddies.”
-- J.D. Englehart, Iraq Veterans Against The War**

**“While there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free”
-- Eugene V. Debs**

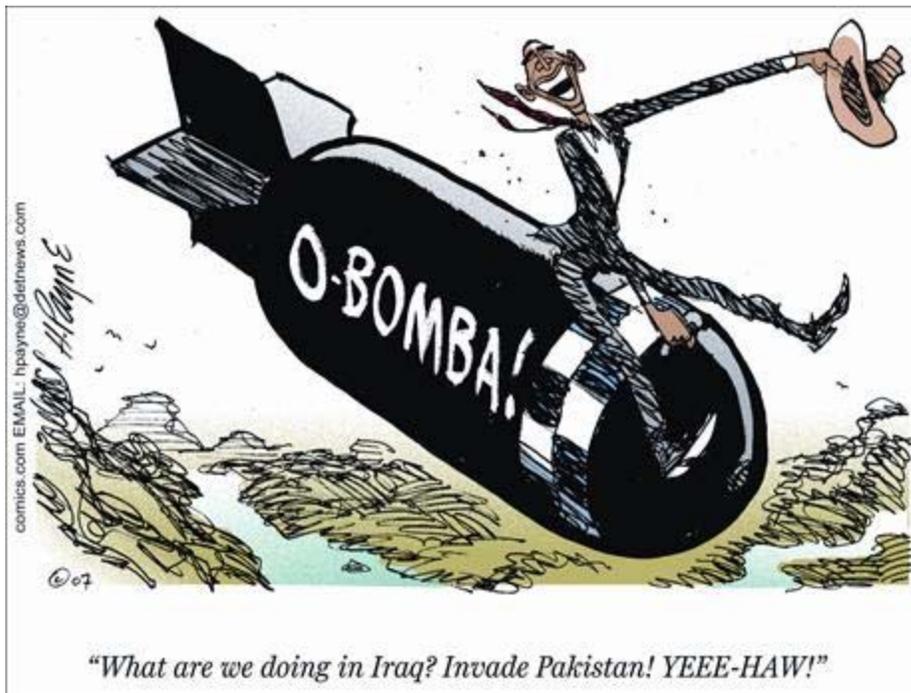
April 28, 2004: The Truth Comes Out



Carl Bunin Peace History April 23-29

The first photos of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal were shown on CBS's "60 Minutes II." The photos had been taken by U.S. military personnel responsible for detaining and interrogating Iraqi prisoners arrested following the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK



"What are we doing in Iraq? Invade Pakistan! YEEE-HAW!"

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, Military Project, who sent this in.]

DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND OR RELATIVE IN THE MILITARY?

Forward GI Special along, or send us the address if you wish and we'll send it regularly. Whether in Iraq or stuck on a base in the USA, this is extra important for your service friend, too often cut off from access to encouraging news of growing resistance to the wars, inside the armed services and at home. Send email requests to address up top or write to: The Military Project, Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657. Phone: 917.677.8057

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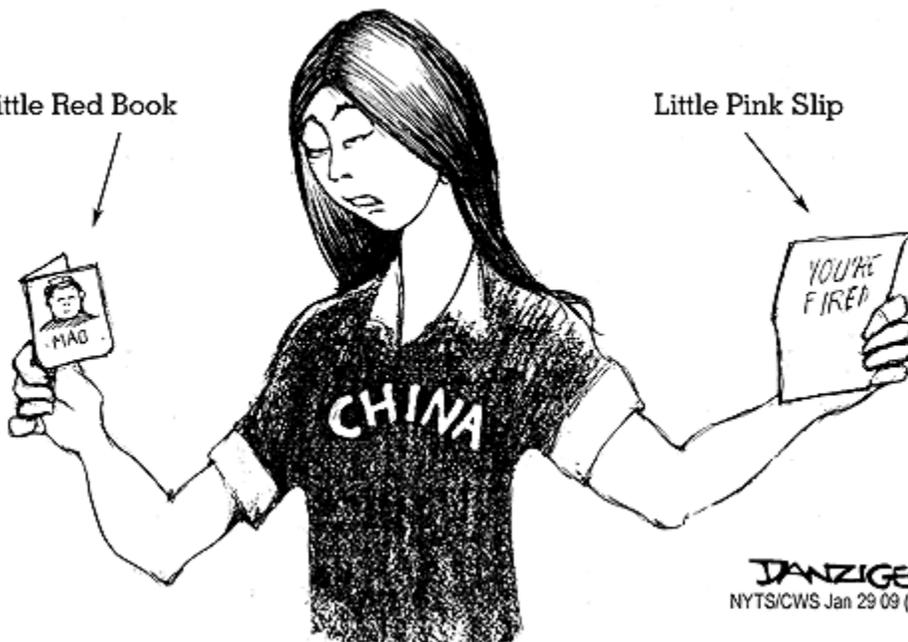
Comments, arguments, articles, and letters from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email contact@militaryproject.org: Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Same address to unsubscribe. Phone: 917.677.8057

CLASS WAR REPORTS

Transition

Little Red Book

Little Pink Slip



Got an opinion? Comments from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send to contact@militaryproject.org: Name, I.D., withheld unless you request identification published.

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**Dubai:
An Loathsome Absolute
Dictator Employs Indentured
Labor, Prison For Union
Organizers, General Terror, And
Lies To Maintain His Filthy
Kingdom:
“This Is A City Built From Nothing
In Just A Few Wild Decades On
Credit And Ecocide, Suppression
And Slavery”
“There Is The Foreign Underclass Who
Built The City, And Are Trapped Here, In
Dirt-Caked Blue Uniforms, Being**

Shouted At By Their Superiors, Like A Chain Gang”



Laborers in a Dubai labor camp: Photo: thefiltercoffee.wordpress.com

[Dubai is an ally of the U.S. government, approved of and complimented by the politicians in Washington DC. And this article, long, opens a fresh window on a largely unknown hell. T]

A Human Rights Watch study found there is a “cover-up of the true extent” of deaths from heat exhaustion, overwork and suicide, but the Indian consulate registered 971 deaths of their nationals in 2005 alone. After this figure was leaked, the consulates were told to stop counting.

“Here, nobody shows their anger. You can't. You get put in jail for a long time, then deported.” Last year, some workers went on strike after they were not given their wages for four months. The Dubai police surrounded their camps with razor-wire and water-cannons and blasted them out and back to work.

But why do you forbid the workers – with force – from going on strike against lousy employers?

“Thank God we don't allow that!” he exclaims. “Strikes are in-convenient! They go on the street – we're not having that. We won't be like France. Imagine a country where they the workers can just stop whenever they want!”

Dubai was meant to be a Middle-Eastern Shangri-La, a glittering monument to Arab enterprise and western capitalism.

But as hard times arrive in the city state that rose from the desert sands, an uglier story is emerging.

The wide, smiling face of Sheikh Mohammed – the absolute ruler of Dubai – beams down on his creation.

His image is displayed on every other building, sandwiched between the more familiar corporate rictuses of Ronald McDonald and Colonel Sanders.

This man has sold Dubai to the world as the city of One Thousand and One Arabian Lights, a Shangri-La in the Middle East insulated from the dust-storms blasting across the region. He dominates the Manhattan-manqué skyline, beaming out from row after row of glass pyramids and hotels smelted into the shape of piles of golden coins. And there he stands on the tallest building in the world – a skinny spike, jabbing farther into the sky than any other human construction in history.

But something has flickered in Sheikh Mohammed's smile.

The ubiquitous cranes have paused on the skyline, as if stuck in time.

There are countless buildings half-finished, seemingly abandoned. In the swankiest new constructions – like the vast Atlantis hotel, a giant pink castle built in 1,000 days for \$1.5bn on its own artificial island – where rainwater is leaking from the ceilings and the tiles are falling off the roof.

This Neverland was built on the Never-Never – and now the cracks are beginning to show. Suddenly it looks less like Manhattan in the sun than Iceland in the desert.

Once the manic burst of building has stopped and the whirlwind has slowed, the secrets of Dubai are slowly seeping out.

This is a city built from nothing in just a few wild decades on credit and ecocide, suppression and slavery.

Dubai is a living metal metaphor for the neo-liberal globalised world that may be crashing – at last – into history.

“The Sheikh Did Not Build This City. It Was Built By Slaves”

Thirty years ago, almost all of contemporary Dubai was desert, inhabited only by cactuses and tumbleweed and scorpions. But downtown there are traces of the town that once was, buried amidst the metal and glass. In the dusty fort of the Dubai Museum, a sanitised version of this story is told.

In the mid-18th century, a small village was built here, in the lower Persian Gulf, where people would dive for pearls off the coast. It soon began to accumulate a cosmopolitan

population washing up from Persia, the Indian subcontinent, and other Arab countries, all hoping to make their fortune. They named it after a local locust, the daba, who consumed everything before it. The town was soon seized by the gunships of the British Empire, who held it by the throat as late as 1971. As they scuttled away, Dubai decided to ally with the six surrounding states and make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The British quit, exhausted, just as oil was being discovered, and the sheikhs who suddenly found themselves in charge faced a remarkable dilemma. They were largely illiterate nomads who spent their lives driving camels through the desert – yet now they had a vast pot of gold. What should they do with it?

Dubai only had a dribble of oil compared to neighbouring Abu Dhabi – so Sheikh Maktoum decided to use the revenues to build something that would last. He would build a city to be a centre of tourism and financial services, sucking up cash and talent from across the globe.

He invited the world to come tax-free – and they came in their millions, swamping the local population, who now make up just 5 per cent of Dubai. A city seemed to fall from the sky in just three decades, whole and complete and swelling. They fast-forwarded from the 18th century to the 21st in a single generation.

If you take the Big Bus Tour of Dubai – the passport to a pre-processed experience of every major city on earth – you are fed the propaganda-vision of how this happened.

“Dubai's motto is 'Open doors, open minds',” the tour guide tells you in clipped tones, before depositing you at the souks to buy camel tea-cosies. “Here you are free. To purchase fabrics,” he adds.

As you pass each new monumental building, he tells you: “The World Trade Centre was built by His Highness...”

But this is a lie.

The sheikh did not build this city.

It was built by slaves.

They are building it now.

“To Get You Here, They Tell You Dubai Is Heaven. Then You Get Here And Realise It Is Hell,” He Says.

There are three different Dubais, all swirling around each other. There are the expats, like Karen; there are the Emiratis, headed by Sheikh Mohammed; and then there is the foreign underclass who built the city, and are trapped here.

They are hidden in plain view.

You see them everywhere, in dirt-caked blue uniforms, being shouted at by their superiors, like a chain gang – but you are trained not to look.

It is like a mantra: the Sheikh built the city.

The Sheikh built the city.

Workers?

What workers?

Every evening, the hundreds of thousands of young men who build Dubai are bussed from their sites to a vast concrete wasteland an hour out of town, where they are quarantined away.

Until a few years ago they were shuttled back and forth on cattle trucks, but the expats complained this was unsightly, so now they are shunted on small metal buses that function like greenhouses in the desert heat. They sweat like sponges being slowly wrung out.

Sonapur is a rubble-strewn patchwork of miles and miles of identical concrete buildings. Some 300,000 men live piled up here, in a place whose name in Hindi means “City of Gold”.

In the first camp I stop at – riven with the smell of sewage and sweat – the men huddle around, eager to tell someone, anyone, what is happening to them.

Sahinal Monir, a slim 24-year-old from the deltas of Bangladesh.

“To get you here, they tell you Dubai is heaven.

“Then you get here and realise it is hell,” he says.

Four years ago, an employment agent arrived in Sahinal's village in Southern Bangladesh. He told the men of the village that there was a place where they could earn 40,000 takka a month (£400) just for working nine-to-five on construction projects. It was a place where they would be given great accommodation, great food, and treated well.

All they had to do was pay an up-front fee of 220,000 takka (£2,300) for the work visa – a fee they'd pay off in the first six months, easy. So Sahinal sold his family land, and took out a loan from the local lender, to head to this paradise.

As soon as he arrived at Dubai airport, his passport was taken from him by his construction company. He has not seen it since.

He was told brusquely that from now on he would be working 14-hour days in the desert heat – where western tourists are advised not to stay outside for even five minutes in summer, when it hits 55 degrees – for 500 dirhams a month (£90), less than a quarter of the wage he was promised.

If you don't like it, the company told him, go home. "But how can I go home? You have my passport, and I have no money for the ticket," he said. "Well, then you'd better get to work," they replied.

Sahinal was in a panic. His family back home – his son, daughter, wife and parents – were waiting for money, excited that their boy had finally made it.

But he was going to have to work for more than two years just to pay for the cost of getting here – and all to earn less than he did in Bangladesh.

He shows me his room.

It is a tiny, poky, concrete cell with triple-decker bunk-beds, where he lives with 11 other men.

All his belongings are piled onto his bunk: three shirts, a spare pair of trousers, and a cellphone.

The room stinks, because the lavatories in the corner of the camp – holes in the ground – are backed up with excrement and clouds of black flies. There is no air conditioning or fans, so the heat is "unbearable. You cannot sleep. All you do is sweat and scratch all night."

At the height of summer, people sleep on the floor, on the roof, anywhere where they can pray for a moment of breeze.

The water delivered to the camp in huge white containers isn't properly desalinated: it tastes of salt. "It makes us sick, but we have nothing else to drink," he says.

The work is "the worst in the world," he says. "You have to carry 50kg bricks and blocks of cement in the worst heat imaginable ... This heat – it is like nothing else. You sweat so much you can't pee, not for days or weeks. It's like all the liquid comes out through your skin and you stink. You become dizzy and sick but you aren't allowed to stop, except for an hour in the afternoon.

"You know if you drop anything or slip, you could die. If you take time off sick, your wages are docked, and you are trapped here even longer."

He is currently working on the 67th floor of a shiny new tower, where he builds upwards, into the sky, into the heat. He doesn't know its name. In his four years here, he has never seen the Dubai of tourist-fame, except as he constructs it floor-by-floor.

Is he angry?

He is quiet for a long time. "Here, nobody shows their anger. You can't. You get put in jail for a long time, then deported."

Last year, some workers went on strike after they were not given their wages for four months. The Dubai police surrounded their camps with razor-wire and water-cannons and blasted them out and back to work.

The “ringleaders” were imprisoned.

I try a different question: does Sohinal regret coming? All the men look down, awkwardly. “How can we think about that? We are trapped. If we start to think about regrets...”

He lets the sentence trail off. Eventually, another worker breaks the silence by adding: “I miss my country, my family and my land. We can grow food in Bangladesh. Here, nothing grows. Just oil and buildings.”

Since the recession hit, they say, the electricity has been cut off in dozens of the camps, and the men have not been paid for months.

Their companies have disappeared with their passports and their pay.

“We have been robbed of everything. Even if somehow we get back to Bangladesh, the loan sharks will demand we repay our loans immediately, and when we can't, we'll be sent to prison.”

This is all supposed to be illegal. Employers are meant to pay on time, never take your passport, give you breaks in the heat – but I met nobody who said it happens.

Not one.

These men are conned into coming and trapped into staying, with the complicity of the Dubai authorities.

Sahinal could well die out here. A British man who used to work on construction projects told me: “There's a huge number of suicides in the camps and on the construction sites, but they're not reported. They're described as 'accidents'.”

Even then, their families aren't free: they simply inherit the debts.

A Human Rights Watch study found there is a “cover-up of the true extent” of deaths from heat exhaustion, overwork and suicide, but the Indian consulate registered 971 deaths of their nationals in 2005 alone. After this figure was leaked, the consulates were told to stop counting.

At night, in the dusk, I sit in the camp with Sohinal and his friends as they scrape together what they have left to buy a cheap bottle of spirits. They down it in one ferocious gulp.

“It helps you to feel numb”, Sohinal says through a stinging throat. In the distance, the glistening Dubai skyline he built stands, oblivious.

“This Abuse Is Endemic To The System, I Say. We're Talking About Hundreds Of Thousands”

I find myself stumbling in a daze from the camps into the sprawling marble malls that seem to stand on every street in Dubai. It is so hot there is no point building pavements; people gather in these cathedrals of consumerism to bask in the air conditioning. So within a ten minute taxi-ride, I have left Sohinal and I am standing in the middle of Harvey Nichols, being shown a £20,000 taffeta dress by a bored salesgirl. "As you can see, it is cut on the bias..." she says, and I stop writing.

Time doesn't seem to pass in the malls. Days blur with the same electric light, the same shined floors, the same brands I know from home. Here, Dubai is reduced to its component sounds: do-buy. In the most expensive malls I am almost alone, the shops empty and echoing.

On the record, everybody tells me business is going fine.

Off the record, they look panicky. There is a hat exhibition ahead of the Dubai races, selling elaborate headgear for £1,000 a pop. "Last year, we were packed. Now look," a hat designer tells me. She swoops her arm over a vacant space.

I approach a blonde 17-year-old Dutch girl wandering around in hotpants, oblivious to the swarms of men gaping at her. "I love it here!" she says. "The heat, the malls, the beach!"

Does it ever bother you that it's a slave society? She puts her head down, just as Sohinal did. "I try not to see," she says.

Even at 17, she has learned not to look, and not to ask; that, she senses, is a transgression too far.

Between the malls, there is nothing but the connecting tissue of asphalt. Every road has at least four lanes; Dubai feels like a motorway punctuated by shopping centres. You only walk anywhere if you are suicidal. The residents of Dubai flit from mall to mall by car or taxis.

How does it feel if this is your country, filled with foreigners? Unlike the expats and the slave class, I can't just approach the native Emiratis to ask questions when I see them wandering around – the men in cool white robes, the women in sweltering black. If you try, the women blank you, and the men look affronted, and tell you brusquely that Dubai is "fine".

So I browse through the Emirati blog-scene and found some typical-sounding young Emiratis. We meet – where else? – in the mall.

Ahmed al-Atar is a handsome 23-year-old with a neat, trimmed beard, tailored white robes, and rectangular wire-glasses. He speaks perfect American-English, and quickly shows that he knows London, Los Angeles and Paris better than most westerners.

Sitting back in his chair in an identikit Starbucks, he announces: "This is the best place in the world to be young! The government pays for your education up to PhD level. You get given a free house when you get married. You get free healthcare, and if it's not good enough here, they pay for you to go abroad. You

don't even have to pay for your phone calls. Almost everyone has a maid, a nanny, and a driver. And we never pay any taxes. Don't you wish you were Emirati?"

I try to raise potential objections to this Panglossian summary, but he leans forward and says: "Look – my grandfather woke up every day and he would have to fight to get to the well first to get water. When the wells ran dry, they had to have water delivered by camel. They were always hungry and thirsty and desperate for jobs. He limped all his life, because he there was no medical treatment available when he broke his leg. Now look at us!"

For Emiratis, this is a Santa Claus state, handing out goodies while it makes its money elsewhere: through renting out land to foreigners, soft taxes on them like business and airport charges, and the remaining dribble of oil.

Most Emiratis, like Ahmed, work for the government, so they're cushioned from the credit crunch. "I haven't felt any effect at all, and nor have my friends," he says. "Your employment is secure. You will only be fired if you do something incredibly bad." The laws are currently being tightened, to make it even more impossible to sack an Emirati.

Sure, the flooding-in of expats can sometimes be "an eyesore", Ahmed says. "But we see the expats as the price we had to pay for this development. How else could we do it? Nobody wants to go back to the days of the desert, the days before everyone came. We went from being like an African country to having an average income per head of \$120,000 a year. And we're supposed to complain?"

He says the lack of political freedom is fine by him.

"You'll find it very hard to find an Emirati who doesn't support Sheikh Mohammed." Because they're scared? "No, because we really all support him. He's a great leader. Just look!" He smiles and says: "I'm sure my life is very much like yours. We hang out, have a coffee, go to the movies. You'll be in a Pizza Hut or Nando's in London, and at the same time I'll be in one in Dubai," he says, ordering another latte.

But do all young Emiratis see it this way?

Can it really be so sunny in the political sands?

In the sleek Emirates Tower Hotel, I meet Sultan al-Qassemi. He's a 31-year-old Emirati columnist for the Dubai press and private art collector, with a reputation for being a contrarian liberal, advocating gradual reform. He is wearing Western clothes – blue jeans and a Ralph Lauren shirt – and speaks incredibly fast, turning himself into a manic whirr of arguments.

"People here are turning into lazy, overweight babies!" he exclaims. "The nanny state has gone too far. We don't do anything for ourselves! Why don't any of us work for the private sector? Why can't a mother and father look after their own child?"

And yet, when I try to bring up the system of slavery that built Dubai, he looks angry.

“People should give us credit,” he insists. “We are the most tolerant people in the world. Dubai is the only truly international city in the world. Everyone who comes here is treated with respect.”

I pause, and think of the vast camps in Sonapur, just a few miles away. Does he even know they exist? He looks irritated. “You know, if there are 30 or 40 cases (of worker abuse) a year, that sounds like a lot but when you think about how many people are here...”

Thirty or 40? This abuse is endemic to the system, I say. We're talking about hundreds of thousands.

Sultan is furious. He splutters: “You don't think Mexicans are treated badly in New York City? And how long did it take Britain to treat people well? I could come to London and write about the homeless people on Oxford Street and make your city sound like a terrible place, too!

“The workers here can leave any time they want! Any Indian can leave, any Asian can leave!”

But they can't, I point out. Their passports are taken away, and their wages are withheld.

“Well, I feel bad if that happens, and anybody who does that should be punished. But their embassies should help them.” They try.

But why do you forbid the workers – with force – from going on strike against lousy employers?

“Thank God we don't allow that!” he exclaims. “Strikes are in-convenient! They go on the street – we're not having that. We won't be like France.

“Imagine a country where they the workers can just stop whenever they want!”

So what should the workers do when they are cheated and lied to?

“Quit. Leave the country.”

I sigh. Sultan is seething now.

“People in the West are always complaining about us,” he says. Suddenly, he adopts a mock-whiny voice and says, in imitation of these disgusting critics: “Why don't you treat animals better? Why don't you have better shampoo advertising? Why don't you treat labourers better?”

It's a revealing order: animals, shampoo, then workers. He becomes more heated, shifting in his seat, jabbing his finger at me. “I gave workers who worked for me safety goggles and special boots, and they didn't want to wear them! It slows them down!”

And then he smiles, coming up with what he sees as his killer argument. “When I see Western journalists criticise us – don't you realise you're shooting yourself in the foot?”

The Middle East will be far more dangerous if Dubai fails. Our export isn't oil, it's hope. Poor Egyptians or Libyans or Iranians grow up saying – I want to go to Dubai. We're very important to the region.

“We are showing how to be a modern Muslim country.

“We don't have any fundamentalists here. Europeans shouldn't gloat at our demise. You should be very worried.... Do you know what will happen if this model fails? Dubai will go down the Iranian path, the Islamist path.” [And that would be a vast improvement.]

Sultan sits back. My arguments have clearly disturbed him; he says in a softer, conciliatory tone, almost pleading: “Listen. My mother used to go to the well and get a bucket of water every morning. On her wedding day, she was given an orange as a gift because she had never eaten one. Two of my brothers died when they were babies because the healthcare system hadn't developed yet. Don't judge us.” He says it again, his eyes filled with intensity: “Don't judge us.”

“This Is A Dictatorship”

But there is another face to the Emirati minority – a small huddle of dissidents, trying to shake the Sheikhs out of abusive laws.

Next to a Virgin Megastore and a Dunkin' Donuts, with James Blunt's “You're Beautiful” blaring behind me, I meet the Dubai dictatorship's Public Enemy Number One.

By way of introduction, Mohammed al-Mansoori says from within his white robes and sinewy face: “Westerners come here and see the malls and the tall buildings and they think that means we are free. But these businesses, these buildings – who are they for?”

“This is a dictatorship. The royal family think they own the country, and the people are their servants. There is no freedom here.”

We snuffle out the only Arabic restaurant in this mall, and he says everything you are banned – under threat of prison – from saying in Dubai.

Mohammed tells me he was born in Dubai to a fisherman father who taught him one enduring lesson: Never follow the herd. Think for yourself. In the sudden surge of development, Mohammed trained as a lawyer. By the Noughties, he had climbed to the head of the Jurists' Association, an organisation set up to press for Dubai's laws to be consistent with international human rights legislation.

And then – suddenly – Mohammed thwacked into the limits of Sheikh Mohammed's tolerance.

Horrified by the “system of slavery” his country was being built on, he spoke out to Human Rights Watch and the BBC.

“So I was hauled in by the secret police and told: shut up, or you will lose your job, and your children will be unemployable,” he says. “But how could I be silent?”

He was stripped of his lawyer's licence and his passport – becoming yet another person imprisoned in this country.

“I have been blacklisted and so have my children. The newspapers are not allowed to write about me.”

Why is the state so keen to defend this system of slavery? He offers a prosaic explanation.

“Most companies are owned by the government, so they oppose human rights laws because it will reduce their profit margins. It's in their interests that the workers are slaves.”

Last time there was a depression, there was a starburst of democracy in Dubai, seized by force from the sheikhs. In the 1930s, the city's merchants banded together against Sheikh Said bin Maktum al-Maktum – the absolute ruler of his day – and insisted they be given control over the state finances. It lasted only a few years, before the Sheikh – with the enthusiastic support of the British – snuffed them out.

And today?

Sheikh Mohammed turned Dubai into Creditopolis, a city built entirely on debt. Dubai owes 107 percent of its entire GDP. It would be bust already, if the neighbouring oil-soaked state of Abu Dhabi hadn't pulled out its chequebook. Mohammed says this will constrict freedom even further.

“Now Abu Dhabi calls the tunes – and they are much more conservative and restrictive than even Dubai. Freedom here will diminish every day.” Already, new media laws have been drafted forbidding the press to report on anything that could “damage” Dubai or “its economy”.

Is this why the newspapers are giving away glossy supplements talking about “encouraging economic indicators”?

Everybody here waves Islamism as the threat somewhere over the horizon, sure to swell if their advice is not followed. Today, every imam is appointed by the government, and every sermon is tightly controlled to keep it moderate. But Mohammed says anxiously:

“We don't have Islamism here now, but I think that if you control people and give them no way to express anger, it could rise. People who are told to shut up all the time can just explode.”

“Oh, The Servant Class!” “You Do Nothing. They'll Do Anything!” A Nice Ethiopian Servant Girl Is The Latest Fashionable Accessory.

All the guidebooks call Dubai a “melting pot”, but as I trawl across the city, I find that every group here huddles together in its own little ethnic enclave – and becomes a caricature of itself.

Later, in a hotel bar, I start chatting to a dyspeptic expat American who works in the cosmetics industry and is desperate to get away from these people. She says: “All the people who couldn't succeed in their own countries end up here, and suddenly they're rich and promoted way above their abilities and bragging about how great they are. I've never met so many incompetent people in such senior positions anywhere in the world.”

She adds: “It's absolutely racist. I had Filipino girls working for me doing the same job as a European girl, and she's paid a quarter of the wages.

The people who do the real work are paid next to nothing, while these incompetent managers pay themselves £40,000 a month.”

With the exception of her, one theme unites every expat I speak to: their joy at having staff to do the work that would clog their lives up Back Home.

Everyone, it seems, has a maid. The maids used to be predominantly Filipino, but with the recession, Filipinos have been judged to be too expensive, so a nice Ethiopian servant girl is the latest fashionable accessory.

It is an open secret that once you hire a maid, you have absolute power over her. You take her passport – everyone does; you decide when to pay her, and when – if ever – she can take a break; and you decide who she talks to. She speaks no Arabic. She cannot escape.

In a Burger King, a Filipino girl tells me it is “terrifying” for her to wander the malls in Dubai because Filipino maids or nannies always sneak away from the family they are with and beg her for help. “They say – 'Please, I am being held prisoner, they don't let me call home, they make me work every waking hour seven days a week.'

“At first I would say – my God, I will tell the consulate, where are you staying? But they never know their address, and the consulate isn't interested. I avoid them now. I keep thinking about a woman who told me she hadn't eaten any fruit in four years. They think I have power because I can walk around on my own, but I'm powerless.”

The only hostel for women in Dubai – a filthy private villa on the brink of being repossessed – is filled with escaped maids.

Mela Matari, a 25-year-old Ethiopian woman with a drooping smile, tells me what happened to her – and thousands like her. She was promised a paradise in the sands by an agency, so she left her four year-old daughter at home and headed here to earn money for a better future. “But they paid me half what they promised. I was put with an Australian family – four children – and Madam made me work from 6am to 1am every day, with no day off. I was exhausted and pleaded for a break, but they just shouted:

“You came here to work, not sleep!” Then one day I just couldn't go on, and Madam beat me. She beat me with her fists and kicked me. My ear still hurts.

They wouldn't give me my wages: they said they'd pay me at the end of the two years. What could I do? I didn't know anybody here. I was terrified."

One day, after yet another beating, Mela ran out onto the streets, and asked – in broken English – how to find the Ethiopian consulate. After walking for two days, she found it, but they told her she had to get her passport back from Madam. "Well, how could I?" she asks. She has been in this hostel for six months. She has spoken to her daughter twice. "I lost my country, I lost my daughter, I lost everything," she says.

As she says this, I remember a stray sentence I heard back at Double Decker. I asked a British woman called Hermione Frayling what the best thing about Dubai was.

"Oh, the servant class!" she trilled. "You do nothing. They'll do anything!"

"Doesn't The Slave Class Bother You?" "That's What We Come For! It's Great, You Can't Do Anything For Yourself!"

The World is empty. It has been abandoned, its continents unfinished. Through binoculars, I think I can glimpse Britain; this sceptred isle barren in the salt-breeze.

Here, off the coast of Dubai, developers have been rebuilding the world. They have constructed artificial islands in the shape of all planet Earth's land masses, and they plan to sell each continent off to be built on. There were rumours that the Beckhams would bid for Britain. But the people who work at the nearby coast say they haven't seen anybody there for months now. "The World is over," a South African suggests.

All over Dubai, crazy projects that were Under Construction are now Under Collapse. They were building an air-conditioned beach here, with cooling pipes running below the sand, so the super-rich didn't singe their toes on their way from towel to sea.

The projects completed just before the global economy crashed look empty and tattered. The Atlantis Hotel was launched last winter in a \$20m fin-de-siecle party attended by Robert De Niro, Lindsay Lohan and Lily Allen. Sitting on its own fake island – shaped, of course, like a palm tree – it looks like an immense upturned tooth in a faintly decaying mouth. It is pink and turreted – the architecture of the pharaohs, as reimagined by Zsa-Zsa Gabor. Its Grand Lobby is a monumental dome covered in glitterballs, held up by eight monumental concrete palm trees.

Standing in the middle, there is a giant shining glass structure that looks like the intestines of every guest who has ever stayed at the Atlantis.

It is unexpectedly raining; water is leaking from the roof, and tiles are falling off.

A South African PR girl shows me around its most coveted rooms, explaining that this is "the greatest luxury offered in the world". We stroll past shops selling £24m diamond rings around a hotel themed on the lost and sunken continent of, yes, Atlantis. There are huge water tanks filled with sharks, which poke around mock-abandoned castles and

dumped submarines. There are more than 1,500 rooms here, each with a sea view. The Neptune suite has three floors, and – I gasp as I see it – it looks out directly on to the vast shark tank. You lie on the bed, and the sharks stare in at you. In Dubai, you can sleep with the fishes, and survive.

But even the luxury – reminiscent of a Bond villain's lair – is also being abandoned. I check myself in for a few nights to the classiest hotel in town, the Park Hyatt. It is the fashionistas' favourite hotel, where Elle Macpherson and Tommy Hilfiger stay, a gorgeous, understated palace. It feels empty. Whenever I eat, I am one of the only people in the restaurant. A staff member tells me in a whisper: "It used to be full here. Now there's hardly anyone." Rattling around, I feel like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, the last man in an abandoned, haunted home.

The most famous hotel in Dubai – the proud icon of the city – is the Burj al Arab hotel, sitting on the shore, shaped like a giant glass sailing boat. In the lobby, I start chatting to a couple from London who work in the City. They have been coming to Dubai for 10 years now, and they say they love it. "You never know what you'll find here," he says. "On our last trip, at the beginning of the holiday, our window looked out on the sea. By the end, they'd built an entire island there."

My patience frayed by all this excess, I find myself snapping: doesn't the omnipresent slave class bother you?

I hope they misunderstood me, because the woman replied: "That's what we come for! It's great, you can't do anything for yourself!" Her husband chimes in: "When you go to the toilet, they open the door, they turn on the tap – the only thing they don't do is take it out for you when you have a piss!" And they both fall about laughing.

A Tourist Beach Covered With Raw Sewage

Dr Mohammed Raouf, the environmental director of the Gulf Research Centre, sounds somber as he sits in his Dubai office and warns: "This is a desert area, and we are trying to defy its environment. It is very unwise. If you take on the desert, you will lose."

Sheikh Maktoum built his showcase city in a place with no useable water. None.

If a recession turns into depression, Dr Raouf believes Dubai could run out of water.

I wanted to understand how the government of Dubai will react, so I decided to look at how it has dealt with an environmental problem that already exists – the pollution of its beaches.

One woman – an American, working at one of the big hotels – had written in a lot of online forums arguing that it was bad and getting worse, so I called her to arrange a meeting. "I can't talk to you," she said sternly. Not even if it's off the record? "I can't talk to you." But I don't have to disclose your name... "You're not listening. This phone is bugged. I can't talk to you," she snapped, and hung up.

The next day I turned up at her office. “If you reveal my identity, I’ll be sent on the first plane out of this city,” she said, before beginning to nervously pace the shore with me. “It started like this. We began to get complaints from people using the beach. The water looked and smelled odd, and they were starting to get sick after going into it. So I wrote to the ministers of health and tourism and expected to hear back immediately – but there was nothing. Silence. I hand-delivered the letters. Still nothing.”

The water quality got worse and worse. The guests started to spot raw sewage, condoms, and used sanitary towels floating in the sea. So the hotel ordered its own water analyses from a professional company. “They told us it was full of fecal matter and bacteria ‘too numerous to count’. I had to start telling guests not to go in the water, and since they’d come on a beach holiday, as you can imagine, they were pretty pissed off.”

She began to make angry posts on the expat discussion forums – and people began to figure out what was happening. Dubai had expanded so fast its sewage treatment facilities couldn’t keep up. The sewage disposal trucks had to queue for three or four days at the treatment plants – so instead, they were simply drilling open the manholes and dumping the untreated sewage down them, so it flowed straight to the sea.

Suddenly, it was an open secret – and the municipal authorities finally acknowledged the problem. They said they would fine the truckers. But the water quality didn’t improve: it became black and stank. “It’s got chemicals in it. I don’t know what they are. But this stuff is toxic.”

She continued to complain – and started to receive anonymous phone calls. “Stop embarrassing Dubai, or your visa will be cancelled and you’re out,” they said. She says: “The expats are terrified to talk about anything. One critical comment in the newspapers and they deport you. So what am I supposed to do? Now the water is worse than ever. People are getting really sick. Eye infections, ear infections, stomach infections, rashes. Look at it!”

There is feces floating on the beach, in the shadow of one of Dubai’s most famous hotels.

“What I learnt about Dubai is that the authorities don’t give a toss about the environment,” she says, standing in the stench. “They’re pumping toxins into the sea, their main tourist attraction, for God’s sake. If there are environmental problems in the future, I can tell you now how they will deal with them – deny it’s happening, cover it up, and carry on until it’s a total disaster.”

As she speaks, a dust-storm blows around us, as the desert tries, slowly, insistently, to take back its land.

“The Trees Are Fake, The Workers' Contracts Are Fake, The Islands Are Fake, The Smiles Are Fake – Even The Water Is Fake!”

On my final night in the Dubai Disneyland, I stop off on my way to the airport, at a Pizza Hut that sits at the side of one of the city’s endless, wide, gaping roads. It is identical to

the one near my apartment in London in every respect, even the vomit-coloured decor. My mind is whirring and distracted. Perhaps Dubai disturbed me so much, I am thinking, because here, the entire global supply chain is condensed. Many of my goods are made by semi-enslaved populations desperate for a chance 2,000 miles away; is the only difference that here, they are merely two miles away, and you sometimes get to glimpse their faces?

Dubai is Market Fundamentalist Globalisation in One City.

I ask the Filipino girl behind the counter if she likes it here. "It's OK," she says cautiously.

Really? I say. I can't stand it.

She sighs with relief and says: "This is the most terrible place! I hate it! I was here for months before I realised – everything in Dubai is fake. Everything you see.

"The trees are fake, the workers' contracts are fake, the islands are fake, the smiles are fake – even the water is fake!"

But she is trapped, she says. She got into debt to come here, and she is stuck for three years: an old story now.

"I think Dubai is like an oasis. It is an illusion, not real. You think you have seen water in the distance, but you get close and you only get a mouthful of sand."

As she says this, another customer enters. She forces her face into the broad, empty Dubai smile and says: "And how may I help you tonight, sir?"



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