Militants' bid to take nurses to unknown destination

KT EXCLUSIVE

Suresh Pattali

DUBAI — Iraqi militants who have seized the deserted Tikrit Teaching Hospital on Tuesday attempted to ferry the Indian nurses and some Bangladeshi construction workers trapped on the war front to an unknown destination, leaving a nervous Indian and Kerala state governments on their toes for a few hours.

The nurses, who fear the militants could be trying to escape from the new theatre of war using the Indians and Bangladeshis as a human shield, called for immediate intervention by the United Nations or US advisers to rescue them.

The nurses have been abandoned by hospital staff and residents fleeing an all-out government offensive to wrest back the city, and are now under the control of militants belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil) which has seized a large swathe of land across Iraq and Syria.

After spending a horror-filled night in the basement kitchen of the hospital under the militants' instruction following fierce battles, the nurses were asked by an English-speaking gunman on Tuesday to board a bus to go to "a safer place".

"They brought in two buses and one of the black-clad masked gunmen [illegible] dark glasses [illegible] one bus an[illegible] workers of [illegible] board the o[illegible] Khaleej Time[illegible] "When a sk[illegible]

being taken to, the militant said government forces were likely to blast the hospital building so they want to move us to a different place."

The gunman gave them a 30-minute deadline to decide as the nurses stood there shell-shocked, nervous and apprehensive. "The ground gave away under my feet. One would never want to recollect those fearful moments. We were hysterical with some making frantic calls home and some wailing," said the nurse.

She said she immediately informed Ambassador Ajar Kumar and Red Cross officials who advised them not to board the bus and to remain in the basement. The nurses also spoke to Chief Minister Oommen Chandy as well as Suresh Reddy and Mathen George, two of the trouble-shooters sent to Iraq recently by New Delhi.

They suspected the militants could be using the Indians as human shield to escape from their hospital hideout which came under heavy bombardment by Iraqi gunships on Monday night. Hectic diplomatic activity followed, with a desperate Chandy making calls to officials in Iraq. The consensus was it was too risky to board the militant buses as they could come under government fire.

As the drama unfolded in a highly-charged atmosphere, the nurses informed *Khaleej Times* they have kept text m[illegible]

46 Indian nurses stranded in Tikrit narrate their ordeal

KT EXCLUSIVE

SURESH PATTALI

DUBAI — Scores of Indian nurses are under "siege" in the Tikrit Teaching Hospital in Iraq.

They are safe but still "in the line of fire" of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), the brutual new brigade that is racing across western Iraq.

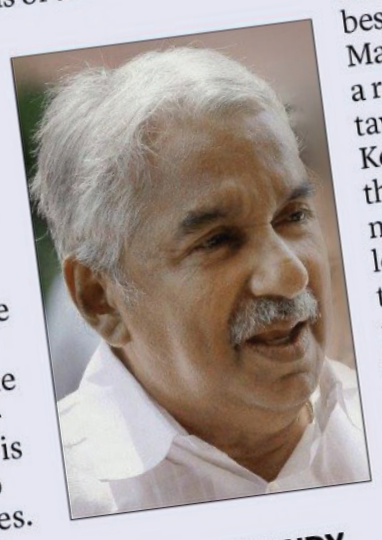
While Western embassies and the United Nations are rushing to evacuate dozens of their staff from Iraq, 46 Indian nurses — all from Kerala — are desperately waiting for a miracle to happen. For them, life has become a living hell.

The nurses have spent seven fear-filled nights in the hospital, subsisting on food that is being rustled up by the authorities. With gun-toting terrorists now effectively guarding the hospital and walking in and out of the building, the nurses who have been holed up in their quarters on the upper floor have only one prayer: Please do something to evacuate us.

But there is precious little the Indian and Iraqi governments or volunteer agencies can do at the moment except advising them to stay put. It's the best option at the moment, they say.

Soon after Tikrit was seized on Wednesday, gunmen moved to set up checkpoints around the city, which lies between the capital Baghdad and Mosul, Iraq's second largest city which was captured the previous day by the Isil, an offshoot of the Al Qaeda terrorist organisation.

Talking to *Khaleej Times* from her quarter in the besieged hospital, Marina M. Jose, a resident of Kottayam district in Kerala, said while the state government is doing its level best to keep them calm and motivated, the need of the hour is an assertive intervention by the Narendra Modi government in New Delhi to enlist the help of the United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to safely take them to Baghdad.



OOMMEN CHANDY... In direct touch with the nurses

"We are safe inside the compound... but we are worried about our fate. The hospital is gradually running out of food. We had no tea, milk and water on Monday which were later

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Sigh of relief as 'militants' offer safe passage to Indian nurses

KT EXCLUSIVE

SURESH PATTALI

DUBAI — There is light at the end of the tunnel for the Indian nurses who have been trapped in the war-torn Iraq city of Tikrit. It was a moment of thanksgiving in their living quarters where the nurses have been holed up for more than two weeks, when the "rebel management" of the hospital informed them they will soon be free birds, one of the nurses confided to *Khaleej Times*.

After a few days of working at wards and operations theatres out of compassion and under the watchful eyes of "masked, gun-wielding visitors", a man wearing a *dishdasha* told the nurses they have the right to be free and united with their families back home.

An elated Oommen Chandy, the Chief Minister of the south Indian state Kerala where the nurses come from, hailed the good news that their safe passage is being arranged. "This is something we all have been looking forward to hear," he said.

Chandy said he has requested New Delhi to arrange for their free repatriation. In case the centre is unable to do that, the state will foot the bill, he said.

A doctor in attendance acted as an interpreter for the Arabic-speaking man, who tried to allay the nurses' fears. "When we narrated our ordeal, he sympathised and assured that no one from "his side would dare touch them".

"Any such aggression will not go unpunished," he promised.

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Indian nurses walk to freedom

Special plane to fly them to Cochin from Arbil today

KT EXCLUSIVE

SURESH PATTALI

DUBAI — In a dramatic turn of events, the 46 nurses who were forcibly taken to Mosul by Iraqi militants were handed over to Indian authorities on Friday afternoon.

At 9am when this correspondent managed to speak to one of the nurses held captive in a Mosul building, she said she was unaware of any such move. The woman sounded a bit worried though she said there was no threat to life. They were served dinner but there was no breakfast which she said could be due to fasting in the holy month of Ramadan.

A few minutes later, jaws dropped and smiles froze on their lips when the militants told the captives to pack up and board a bus to travel to the airport. They did not say which airport they were headed to, though most of them presumed it to be Arbil, which is around 80km away.

The women from the south Indian state of Kerala scrambled to send "homecoming" messages to their parents. At the drop of a hat, politicians took to the social media to hail the happy ending to the nurses saga as a huge diplomatic victory for the Narendra Modi government at the centre.

The visual media celebrated the news as parents forwarded messages from their wards.

According to sources, the militants handed over the nurses at the Mosul checkpoint to intermediaries who ferried them through the no-man's land to the Kurdish checkpoint. The sources said that the Kurdish authorities, after formalities, transported the women to the Arbil checkpoint and handed them over to waiting Indian Embassy officials, including Ambassador Ajay Kumar.

It was a moment for prayer and thanksgiving. Calls flew to families and friends back home.

Marina M. Jose, one of the free birds, spoke to *Khaleej Times* soon after. "We are all so happy. God is great. My sincere thanks to the local authorities and the Indian government and embassy officials for securing our release and all fellow Indians for keeping us in their prayers," Marina said.

The nurses were then shifted to hotel rooms in the Kurdish regional capital for an overnight stay. The Indian mission has made all

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The push and pull behind Isil U-turn

Suresh Pattali

DUBAI — While euphoria enveloped India over the release of the 46 nurses from their captors in Iraq, questions that the Narendra Modi government wouldn't answer raised a few eyebrows.

Who helped secure their release and would this also mean freedom is imminent for the 39 Indian workers abducted by gunmen near Mosul? "Diplomacy works through the front door, we are using other doors," said External Affairs Ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin.

However, sources pointed out that a bouquet of factors contributed to the release of the nurses within hours after they were forcibly taken from the Tikrit Teaching Hospital by Islamic State of Iraq militants.

Intervention at the highest level, interaction with regional states, the Isil's desire to present itself as a responsible actor and the spirit of the holy month of Ramadan are highlighted as the possible factors.

There was a script. It wasn't a voluntary U-turn by the militants who had transported the nurses all the way to their citadel. But the script was probably written only after the militants took the nurses to checkmate advancing Iraqi government troops who recently wrested back one-third of the city and most of the Tikrit Teaching Hospital.

The sources said India had been exploring different channels. After 32 Turkish truck drivers were released by the Iraqi militants on Thursday, India's Ministry of External Affairs reportedly held talks with its counterparts in Jordan, Turkey and Syria to find how it was arranged. They said External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj also held telephonic talks with foreign ministers of the GCC states.

The sources said it's probably intervention at the highest level by a regional player that spurred the Isil, which saw the women's release as a timely "gambit to gain at least a semblance of sympathy" at a time when the world is looking at them as the most ruthless killing force. And there is no better time than the holy month of Ramadan to show benevolence.