

Brazil's Odebrecht Gathers People from 31 Countries for Its Libyan Project

Contributed by Alexandre Rocha
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Brazilian contractor Odebrecht, aside from know-how, material, equipment, and machinery, had to bring to Libya an army of workers of 31 different nationalities to carry out the construction that it has been entrusted in the country. There are approximately 5,000 direct jobs and 1,100 indirect ones, according to the company's CEO in Tripoli, Leonardo Villar.

From that total, 260 are company employees who have been reassigned from other countries, and who are considered "strategic." According to Villar, the company's policy is to have people from its own ranks in at least half the technical and managerial tasks, so as to "bring in the company's culture." "The other half come from the market," said the executive.

The international labor force is present at every level of the business, from construction sites to the highest leadership positions. Brazilians, such as Villar, total to 160. In order to manage this true Tower of Babel, the company must take care of details ranging from food to putting together work hierarchies, attempting to group up people of similar origins.

Besides the Brazilians, there are also Egyptians, Turks, Thais, Vietnamese, Colombians, Argentines, Mexicans and, of course, Libyans, among several others. Lodging, uniforms, transport and medical care needs to be provided to all of these people.

"To take care of the food, we often bring cooks from the workers' countries of origin. We seek to have managers of the same nationality [as that of their subordinates], so that they may have command over the group," stated Villar, citing two examples of how the company addresses the matter.

Construction workers are, in their majority, Vietnamese, Turkish and Egyptian, and a large share of them are recruited by means of companies hired by the governments of their own countries of origin. They are mostly men who seek jobs abroad in order to send their families money. The companies take care of the workers' training and transportation to the country where construction work is taking place. The employer, however, is Odebrecht.

According to Villar, many countries with vast labor force availability have policies that encourage the seeking of jobs abroad as a means of increasing the attraction of capital, by means of remittances to families and know-how. In Egypt, for instance, expatriates' incomes are an important source of foreign capital inflow.

Approximately 23% of employees are Libyan, and are mainly employed in administrative positions and machinery operation. "All of our drivers, for example, are Libyan. We also have engineers, lawyers and accountants. We seek to hire as many locals as we can, because with them it is easier to understand the country's system to communicate," said the executive. The percentage of Libyans is only second to that of Thai workers.

Brazilians, in turn, are regarded by the company as an important differential. "Brazilians are very flexible, due to the fact that there are so many ethnicities in Brazil, and they all coexist well," said Villar. He added that Brazilians are used to getting down to business when it comes to showing employees how the work is done, and that ensures a good level of learning.

One such Brazilian professional is Rio de Janeiro native Diego Berrino, who works as a manager at the site of the new Tripoli airport. He, who has been with Odebrecht for 10 years now, has spent two years in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates.

Present in the country for roughly one year, Berrino says that adaptation is more difficult in Libya than it is in the Emirates. In the Gulf country, foreigners are the majority, whereas in Libya, the opposite holds true, and most of the population only speaks Arabic. Less cosmopolitan, the country also has more deep-rooted habits.

"I do, however, have contact with the locals; I try to experience their culture, and have even been invited to a wedding," claimed Berrino. When he told his colleague that he was going to extend the invitation to the event to his wife - physiotherapist Julliana Lopes, from the state of Rio Grande do Sul -, he was surprised to learn that separate parties were held for men and women.

Berrino is one of 20 foreign employees who have brought their wife and children to Libya. In addition to their son Gabriel, who is only nine months old, the couple also brought along their babysitter, Vera, from the municipality of Urugaiana, plus Julliana and a puppy, the Yorkshire Lua (Portuguese for moon).

In the beginning, Berrino lived alone in Tripoli, because Julliana was pregnant and gave birth in Brazil. She moved in when Gabriel was three months old. To her, who had a more active social and professional life in Brazil and in the Emirates, adaptation proved more difficult, as she found herself playing the role of housewife while her husband worked, just as he did elsewhere.

Julliana claims, however, that her son helps a lot, as he takes up most of her time. The other foreigners at Odebrecht live close by, so a circle of friends was formed. On Friday, a day of rest in Arab countries in general, the most common activity is attending barbecues at friends' houses. Other options of the couple are going out for dinner, and going to the company's own club.

Even though she misses her family, her Brazilian friends, and a busier social life, Julliana does not consider returning to Brazil anytime soon. Working abroad gives her husband better professional and financial conditions than those he would have in Brazil, plus an opportunity for his son to study at high-level schools, and for the family to live in a large and comfortable house.

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