

Indian Diplomat Seeks Dismissal of US Criminal Charges In the News January 18, 2014

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

This week, a lawyer for an Indian diplomat asked a court in the United States to dismiss immigration and employment charges against her. Devyani Khobragade served as Deputy Counsel General at India's consulate in New York City. She is accused of making false statements when she sought permission to bring an Indian national to the US to serve as her housekeeper. She also is charged with paying the woman less than the lowest wage permitted under US law.

The case has angered a lot of people in India and led to anti-American demonstrations. The dispute began when US police arrested Ms. Khobragade last month after she dropped off her daughter at school. Police searched the 39-year-old diplomat for weapons possibly hidden inside her clothing. They forced her to wear handcuffs. Later, she was jailed in a room with drug suspects.

Ms. Khobragade was released after a court appearance.

The judge agreed to free the diplomat in exchange for her promise to return for trial and a bail payment of \$250,000. Ms. Khobragade told the court she was not guilty of the charges. She is accused of paying the housekeeper less than two dollars an hour and making her work as many as 100 hours a

week. In official documents, she promised to pay \$4,500 in monthly wages to the housekeeper. Instead, the woman received only \$537 a month.

Some Indians have described the diplomat's treatment by police as shameful. Salman Khurshid is India's Foreign Minister.

"We feel a very extreme level of distress in terms of human element that is involved."

Another official, Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde, cancelled his meeting with a five-member US congressional delegation. But the diplomatic dispute did not end there. The Indian government asked the US embassy to withdraw one of its officers. It also removed security barriers from outside the embassy, ordered a suspension of some diplomatic activities, and took back airport passes.

An American law professor says India's government has overreacted. Thomas McDonnell teaches at Pace University Law School.

"The idea of removing the concrete barriers in front of our embassy that protect our ambassador and other officials from a terrorist attack seems extraordinarily out of proportion."

US officials say New York police followed standard rules in making the arrest. One question is whether Devyani Khobragade had special rights as a diplomat. But a State Department official said she did not have the top level of diplomatic immunity.

American media and other groups have been following the case. Jo Becker

works for Human Rights Watch.

“The diplomat has been charged with a felony and there has been a big uproar over her treatment. But the controversy had completely overshadowed the exploitation of her employee and similar abuses against millions of domestic workers that happen worldwide every single day”.

Ms. Becker noted that Secretary of State John Kerry called a top Indian official to express regret over the incident. Yet US officials say the charges against Ms. Khobragade will not be dropped, and that she would face them if she returns.

And that’s In the News from VOA Learning English. I’m Steve Ember.