

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE01/660/2013
18 December 2013

Qatar: Unpaid migrant construction workers left to go hungry

More than 80 migrant construction workers in Qatar who worked for nearly a year without pay on a prestigious tower in Doha's financial district are facing serious food shortages and need urgent government assistance, Amnesty International said today.

On International Migrants' Day, the organization is calling on the Qatari authorities to address the plight of the employees of Lee Trading and Contracting (LTC) who were working in conditions that may amount to forced labour.

In mid-November Amnesty International's Secretary General visited the workers' camp in the al-Sailiya industrial area and subsequently asked the Ministries of Labour and Interior to address the situation at the company as a matter of priority.

"It is now one month since we visited these men and found them living in desperate conditions. But their ordeal has not ended," said Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"They have not had been paid for nearly a year and can't even buy food to sustain themselves on a day-to-day basis. They also can't afford to send money back home to their families or to pay off debts.

"The Qatari government must step in now and end this crisis. The men have told us they simply want to collect the unpaid wages they are owed and to leave the country. The Ministries of Labour and Interior must deliver that as soon as possible. Doing so will signal that the government really means what it says about protecting workers' rights."

Conditions at the camp are grim. Some workers are sleeping on hard wooden boards without mattresses, and some of the temporary accommodation buildings are dangerously unstable; the floors and ceilings in one bedroom are close to collapsing.

Unpaid wages

The group, which includes around 60 Nepalese workers as well as migrants from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Nigeria, China and Bangladesh, are owed up to a year's worth of salaries. They have been fitting out two floors – 38 and 39 - in Doha's Al Bidda Tower, which has been dubbed "Qatar's Home of Football" because a number of football-related organizations have offices there.

Amnesty International has seen documentation suggesting that in total LTC owes the workers around 1.5 million riyals (approximately US\$412,000). The exact reasons the company did not pay the men remain unclear.

The project was completed in October 2013, and since then the workers have been stranded in their camp, without pay and facing severe shortages of food.

One Nepalese labourer told researchers: “‘Do the work and we’ll pay you tomorrow’, they said ... We kept doing the work and they kept changing the date and we never got paid.”

The same man said that his sister had committed suicide in Nepal in mid-2013 because of the financial problems his family were facing. He had not been able to send them any money for many months and was not able to return home for her funeral.

The workers have all filed cases against LTC at Doha’s Labour Court to try to reclaim their salaries. But the court has asked them each to pay a fee of 600 riyals (US\$165) for an expert report to be commissioned into their case. Unless this is paid, the cases cannot progress.

The workers told Amnesty International that the court rejected their request for the fees to be waived because of their financial situation.

Under Qatar’s Labour Law, workers are supposed to be exempt from paying judicial fees.

“This case illustrates perfectly the massive obstacles migrant workers face to getting justice in Qatar. How can a worker who has not been paid for nearly a year afford such a sum of money?” said Salil Shetty.

Allegations of forced labour

Some of the men have alleged that when they stopped work in August 2013, in protest at the lack of salaries, a representative of LTC threatened them with jail. The men said that they returned to work as a result.

The company representative in question has strongly denied this allegation to Amnesty International.

Under the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Forced Labour Convention, forcing the men to work under threat of imprisonment would constitute forced labour.

Food shortages and other problems for the workers

The LTC employees are not being provided with food or food allowances and have no salaries to buy food. The company had been providing them 250 riyals (US\$69) per month as a food allowance but this stopped in October.

The workers are now being forced to borrow money to buy food. In mid-November several men complained to Amnesty International of hunger.

A representative of LTC told Amnesty International in November that the food allowance had stopped the previous month because, “at the end of the day, I’m not making any money out of this company”.

Because of Qatar’s restrictive sponsorship system, the workers are tied to LTC and are not allowed to earn money by working at another company.

In late November, Doha residents concerned about the workers’ situation collected donations and sent a delivery of food to provide temporary assistance.

“It is shameful to think that in one of the richest countries in the world, migrant workers are being left to go hungry. The Qatari authorities must take action immediately,” said Salil Shetty.

The workers also told researchers that the company had not issued them with valid residence permits, which are required under Qatari law, leaving them at risk of arrest.

An LTC representative told Amnesty International that the company was unable to pay for permits for the

workers.

Background

Last month Amnesty International published [The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup](#), an in-depth report examining abuses against migrant construction workers by employers and the Qatari government's failures to protect workers' rights.