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JOINT LETTER

QATAR: ENSURE PROTECTION OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN COVID-19 RESPONSE

To: H.E. Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior

Copy: H.E. Yousuf Mohamed Al Othman Fakhroo, Minister of Administrative Development, Labour & Social Affairs
H.E. Hassan Al Thawadi, Secretary General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy
H.E. Dr Ali bin Smaikh al-Marri, Chairman of National Human Rights Committee (NHRC), and
Secretary-General of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions

March 31, 2020

Your Excellency,

We, a coalition of civil society organizations and trade unions, write to urge your government to ensure that migrant workers receive adequate protection from COVID-19. We acknowledge the positive steps that your government has taken so far to protect migrant workers infected and at risk of infection by COVID-19 and urge you to supplement these with further actions that protect public health and are consistent with fundamental human rights and the underpinning principle of non-discrimination. As the UN Migration Network outlined in its statement of March 20, “the inclusion of all migrants and marginalized groups is necessary in all aspects of the response to COVID-19, whether we are looking at prevention, detection, or equitable access to treatment, care or containment measures, or safe conditions of work.”

On March 11 2020, the Ministry of Public Health announced 238 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 amongst expatriates who reside in one residential complex, later identified as the Industrial Area on the outskirts of Doha. The total figure of confirmed cases has climbed to 781 as of March 31. On March 17, the Supreme Committee for Crisis Management, announced further measures to “ensure the population remains at low risk of being affected”, including by closing parts of the Industrial Area for two weeks. On March 21, the Government Communications Office said in a statement to Al Jazeera that “in the quarantined area, individuals are being seen by doctors and medical personnel, with regular testing and monitoring

for all individuals.” It also described efforts to distribute vital supplies, to ensure that workers’ daily needs are met and salaries paid on schedule. We welcome these measures.

We recognise the challenges Qatar is facing in protecting people from Covid-19, as well as the pressure it is under to deliver the infrastructure required for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. A positive response to this situation will, we believe, not only protect public health and save lives, but serve as a model for the region. As such, we urge you to take further steps to:

- ***Ensure that all workers, quarantined or otherwise, whose living conditions leave them particularly vulnerable to infection, are tested and provided with appropriate medical treatment, and that undocumented workers can seek medical treatment without fear of detention. All workers should have access to adequate housing facilities, including facility to isolate themselves if necessary, as well as water and sanitation, so they can effectively protect themselves.***

Conditions in the Industrial Area, where accommodation is in many cases overcrowded and unsanitary, and where many workers already report respiratory problems due to living and working conditions, provide a unique challenge that demands a tailored response. Other labour accommodation camps not under quarantine will require similar attention from the authorities to prevent the virus from spreading further. This response should include measures to monitor whether companies across all sectors are operating responsibly to implement the government's own guidelines and requirements.

- ***Ensure that no one, including migrant workers, is detained for violating the quarantine. Detention is counterproductive to protecting public health in the COVID-19 context, as detention facilities further increase vulnerability to infection. Ensure that all workers who have been detained previously are tested with their consent; provided with adequate medical care if needed; and released from detention with the possibility of self-isolation where necessary. Refrain from arbitrary deportations of migrant workers, including as a means to contain COVID-19. Suspend arrests for workers who are accused of “absconding” or other immigration violations, ensuring alternative and safe accommodation if they could otherwise become homeless. End immigration detention and allow migrant workers who wish to return home to do so when possible.***

We are concerned by reports and images from jails and detention centres, which suggest that workers whom authorities have arrested have been detained in cramped conditions thus increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19. According to some Nepalese journalists, Qatar has deported several hundred Nepalese workers since March 16. It is unclear if these workers were all tested for Covid-19 prior to deportation, what the legal basis for their deportation was, and whether they will be able to receive any unpaid salaries and benefits.

- ***Ensure that migrant workers who are unable to work, either due to preventative quarantine or testing positive for COVID-19, continue to receive their full wages***

On March 18, Qatar shut down all shops and bank branches in shopping malls and on March 22 outlawed “all forms of gathering”. Many workers, including security guards and general cleaners employed by labor supply companies, are thus under preventative quarantine and unable to work. Many low-wage migrant workers in the construction industry continue to work despite being particularly vulnerable both as a result of the nature of their work and their often cramped housing conditions. We welcome the government’s announcement that it will ensure that workers in the locked-down parts of the Industrial Area are paid on time. However, we urge

you to extend this commitment to ensure that *all* migrant workers who are unable to work as a result of measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, are paid on time and in full, and that those who continue to work are not compelled to do so under threat of reprisals. We furthermore urge you to ensure that workers can file petitions remotely with the Labour Disputes Settlement Committee during this period.

- ***Provide the public with information to ensure that migrant workers, including domestic workers, do not face discrimination or stigma in relation to the COVID-19 virus.***

A recent preliminary assessment report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, who visited Qatar from November 24 to December 1, 2019 described in detail how low-paid migrant workers are subjected to systematic racial discrimination. We urge the governments to combat stigma and discrimination by using mass media to expand public awareness of human rights, recognizing that the virus knows no boundaries and recognizes no distinctions of race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Media information campaigns will be of particular value in informing employers of the importance of protecting migrant workers.

- ***In light of their acute vulnerability, ensure domestic workers are provided with access to timely and adequate protective measures and healthcare, and receive sick pay if they are unable to work due to illness.***

Domestic workers who are confined in family homes and often work extremely long hours without adequate protective clothing are at particular risk. These conditions are likely to be aggravated in the current context as many abuses and harsh working conditions are likely to increase during this time. Employers should be told to provide domestic workers with protective equipment like gloves and masks for both cleaning and caring for any sick individuals, respecting a limit of eight daily working hours and not forcing excessive overtime work on them, providing a rest day, and ensuring that they are able to communicate with their family and friends. Authorities should notify the public that employers who abuse domestic workers during this period will be prosecuted and empower courts to enforce sanctions that will have a deterrent effect. The Ministry Of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs should ensure a hotline that workers or their families can call in situations of distress, and free any worker who is in distress.

The Supreme Committee for Crisis Management would be the ideal body to brief migrant community leaders in Qatar on the steps that the authorities are taking to protect migrant workers at this time, and all signatories to this letter remain ready to assist wherever we can.

We will be sending similar letters to other Gulf States with similarly vulnerable migrant worker populations, but where there is less transparency on how the issue is affecting migrant workers. In this regard, we commend Qatar's approach and urge you to allow the media to report without restriction.

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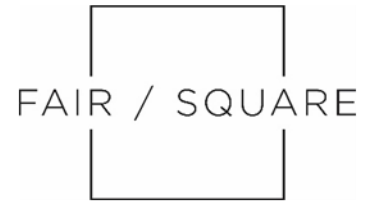
Equidem



Equidem Nepal



Fair/Square



François Crépeau

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Global Labor Justice



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