

AI Index: PRE01/599/2013
17 November 2013

Qatar: End corporate exploitation of migrant construction workers

A new report by Amnesty International finds Qatar's construction sector rife with abuse, with workers employed on multi-million dollar projects suffering serious exploitation.

As construction is set to begin on the FIFA World Cup 2022 stadiums, the report, [*The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup*](#), unpicks complex contractual chains and reveals widespread and routine abuse of migrant workers - in some cases amounting to forced labour.

"It is simply inexcusable in one of the richest countries in the world, that so many migrant workers are being ruthlessly exploited, deprived of their pay and left struggling to survive," said Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"Construction companies and the Qatari authorities alike are failing migrant workers. Employers in Qatar have displayed an appalling disregard for the basic human rights of migrant workers. Many are taking advantage of a permissive environment and lax enforcement of labour protections to exploit construction workers."

In Qatar, migrant construction workers often work for small and medium sized enterprises sub-contracted to major companies who in some cases fail to ensure they are not exploited.

"Companies must ensure that migrant workers employed on construction projects linked to their operations are not being abused. They should be proactive and not just take action when abuses are drawn to their attention. Turning a blind eye to any form of exploitation is unforgivable, particularly when it is destroying people's lives and livelihoods," said Salil Shetty.

The report, based on interviews with workers, employers and government officials, documents a range of abuses against migrant workers. These include non-payment of wages, harsh and dangerous working conditions, and shocking standards of accommodation. Researchers also met dozens of construction workers who were prevented from leaving the country for many months by their employers – leaving them trapped in Qatar with no way out.

"The world's spotlight will continue to shine on Qatar in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup offering the government a unique chance to demonstrate on a global stage that they are serious about their commitment to human rights and can act as a role model to the rest of the region," said Salil Shetty.

Amnesty International's findings have highlighted the inadequacy of the government's existing arrangements to protect migrant workers. Amnesty International urges the government to enforce existing labour protections– which many employers flout routinely. It is also calling for an overhaul of the 'sponsorship' system, which leaves migrant workers unable to leave the country or change jobs without

their employers' permission.

The report also sheds light on current practices within the construction industry, in which some managers consider it normal to violate labour standards. Discriminatory attitudes towards migrant workers in Qatar – many of whom come from South or Southeast Asia – are common. Amnesty International researchers heard a manager of one construction firm referring to the workers as “the animals”.

Amnesty International found that some of the workers who had suffered abuses were working for subcontractors employed by global companies, including Qatar Petroleum, Hyundai E&C and OHL Construction.

The organization contacted several major companies with regard to cases it had documented. Many expressed serious concerns about Amnesty International's findings and some said that they had carried out investigations. One company said it had upgraded its inspection regime as a result.

The findings give rise to fears that during the construction of high-profile projects in Qatar, including those which may be of integral importance to the staging of the 2022 World Cup, workers may be subjected to exploitation.

In one case, the employees of a company delivering critical supplies to a construction project associated with the planned FIFA headquarters during the 2022 World Cup, were subjected to serious labour abuses.

Nepalese workers employed by the supplier said they were “treated like cattle”. Employees were working up to 12 hour days and seven day weeks, including during Qatar's searingly hot summer months.

Amnesty International is calling on FIFA to work with the Qatari authorities and World Cup organizers as a matter of priority to prevent abuses.

“Our findings indicate an alarming level of exploitation in the construction sector in Qatar. FIFA has a duty to send a strong public message that it will not tolerate human rights abuses on construction projects related to the World Cup,” said Salil Shetty.

“Qatar is recruiting migrant workers at a remarkable rate to support its construction boom, with the population increasing at 20 people an hour. Many migrants arrive in Qatar full of hopes, only to have these crushed soon after they arrive. There's no time to delay - the government must act now to end this abuse.”

The report identifies cases that constitute forced labour. Some workers interviewed by Amnesty International were living in fear of losing everything; threatened with penalty fines, deportation or loss of income if they did not show up to work even though they were not being paid.

Faced with mounting debts and unable to support their families back at home, many migrant workers have suffered severe psychological distress with some even driven to the brink of suicide.

“Please tell me - is there any way to get out of here? ... We are going totally mad,” one Nepalese construction worker, unpaid for seven months and prevented from leaving Qatar for three months, told Amnesty International.

The organization has documented cases where workers were effectively blackmailed by their employers in order to get out of the country. Researchers witnessed 11 men signing papers in front of government officials falsely confirming that they had received their wages, in order to get their passports back to leave Qatar.

Many workers reported poor health and safety standards at work, including some who said they were not issued with helmets on sites. A representative of Doha's main hospital stated earlier this year that more

than 1,000 people were admitted to the trauma unit in 2012 having fallen from height at work. Ten per cent were disabled as a result and the mortality rate was “significant”.

Researchers also found migrant workers living in squalid, overcrowded accommodation with no air conditioning, exposed to overflowing sewage or uncovered septic tanks. Several camps lacked power and researchers found one large group of men living without running water.

The organization called on the Qatari government to seize the opportunity to lead the way regionally on protection of migrant workers’ rights.

“Unless critical, far-reaching steps are taken immediately, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who will be recruited in the coming years to deliver Qatar’s vision face a high risk of being abused,” said Salil Shetty.

Background

Amnesty International carried out interviews with approximately 210 migrant workers in the construction sector, including 101 individual interviews, during two visits to Qatar in October 2012 and March 2013. The organization also engaged with 22 companies involved in construction projects in Qatar, including in meetings, telephone calls and written correspondence. Researchers held at least 14 meetings with Qatari government representatives, including from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Labour.

The report forms part of Amnesty International’s work on labour exploitation of migrant workers. In 2011 the organization documented abusive practices by Nepalese recruitment agencies in its report *False Promises: Exploitation and forced labour of Nepalese migrant workers*. The report found that agencies were using deceptive practices to traffic migrant workers for exploitation and forced labour in the Gulf States and Malaysia, and called on the Nepalese government to improve protection of its migrant workers.