

Qatar and FIFA must act now to stop migrant worker deaths and improve labour rights

Asian Human Rights Commission

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Qatar, in its desperate rush to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, has emerged as a new killing field for migrant workers mainly from South Asia. Its death toll has gone beyond 1200 already, and is estimated to reach a staggering high of 4000 before the first ball is kicked in the event opener. These deaths have reportedly come from forcing workers involved in various projects related to the event to work and live in extreme, inhuman conditions. The International Trade Union Confederation has revealed many cases of systemic abuse of migrant labour, such as forced labour in harsh climatic conditions leading to sudden strokes, withholding access to water at temperatures exceeding 50 degrees Celsius, confiscation of their passports to prevent them from escaping, and so on.

The only thing worse than the tragic deaths themselves is the silence maintained by the world community. This silence comes with full knowledge of the horrors occurring. In 2013, a report in The Guardian elaborated upon the unfolding disaster:

[T]his summer, Nepalese workers died at a rate of almost one a day in Qatar, many of them young men who had sudden heart attacks. The investigation found evidence to suggest that thousands of Nepalese, who make up the single largest group of labourers in Qatar, face exploitation and abuses that amount to modern-day slavery, as defined by the International Labour Organisation, during a building binge paving the way for 2022. According to documents obtained from the Nepalese embassy in Doha, at least 44 workers died between 4 June and 8 August. More than half died of heart attacks, heart failure or workplace accidents.

The issue was even raised in the European parliament with the officialdom of FIFA in attendance. Similarly, data was available with the embassies of the countries these workers came from. The Indian embassy in Doha for instance, put the Indian casualties at 771, while Nepal pegged casualties at 385. The forced labour comes from the kafala system prevailing in Qatar for contractual migrant workers: workers are tied to their employer and not allowed to change jobs or leave the country without permission, under this modern incarnation of slavery.

Despite the unfolding saga, none of the stakeholders from the state of Qatar, the native countries of the migrant workers, or FIFA took any responsibility for the deaths, let alone steps to stop the deaths immediately. After much criticism from the international trade union and human rights community, FIFA president Sepp Blatter owned that FIFA has 'some responsibility' for workers constructing venues for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. He concluded however, that it 'cannot interfere in the rights of the workers'. He noted that the living and working conditions of the migrant labor force remained primarily a responsibility of the state of Qatar, and secondly of the companies employing them. He vaguely acknowledged that FIFA can help 'resolve this problem through Football', though he did not elaborate how and when. Theo Zwanzinger, Germany's member of the FIFA executive, was clearer in his betrayal of human rights standards, conceding that while the working conditions in Qatar are "absolutely unacceptable", any attempts of shifting the event would be 'counterproductive'.

Meanwhile, the state of Qatar shrugged off the deaths with an abandon befitting dictatorial regimes. Faced with hard questions, it first went into denial and made absurd claims like the numbers of deaths among the Indian community are normal because of their huge numbers. After facing more flak for these claims, it enacted a Migrant Workers Welfare Charter. The Charter pledges that strict standards of health and safety, equal treatment and so on will be taken care of. Other issues such as the payment of wages and the confiscation of passports would also be taken care of, according to the government. The Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee further asserted that the safety, security, health and dignity of workers—be they professionals or construction workers—is of paramount importance to it, and committed to change working conditions to ensure a lasting legacy of improved worker welfare.

These promises largely amounted to nothing however, as the Charter it had drafted 'in close consultation with the International Labor Organization' will apply only to the companies directly building World Cup venues. In other words, the great number of migrant workers employed in wider infrastructure projects required to handle the influx of players, fans and media will not benefit from the Charter.

With both the Kingdom of Qatar and FIFA being cash-surplus, there is no dearth of funds to improve the conditions and stop the deaths immediately. 2011 estimates of the cost of the FIFA World Cup were pegged at an astounding USD 220 billion, about 60 times the USD 3.5 billion that South Africa spent on the World Cup in 2010.

It is in this context that the inexplicably high death rate of migrant workers must become an immediate concern for all stakeholders, from hosts and FIFA to the fans. It is high time to assert that no sports event can be bigger than the lives of even one migrant worker, forget the thousands perishing in Qatar. Not a single accidental death had taken place on the construction sites of the London Olympics, and there is no reason why Qatar and FIFA can be excused for so many.

Amidst all the hype focusing on the hot climatic conditions that would take a toll on the various football teams playing in the World Cup, it is prudent to also take stock of the migrant labour working in harsh weather conditions, endangering their lives, in preparation of the World Cup. In deciding to go ahead with its decision to hold a world cup in Qatar despite perceiving it as a 'risk', FIFA is not blame free; it is in fact, fully liable for the mounting death toll in Qatar.

Together with various civil society and labour rights organizations, the Asian Human Rights Commission calls upon both Qatar and FIFA to act immediately and ensure that no more lives are lost. Qatar should also implement comprehensive labour reforms, guaranteeing living wages and the right to collective bargaining for workers.