

# The World Cup and Workers' Human Rights in Qatar. “The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game”

Amnesty International Criticism Returns Qatar to Square One

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*A new report from Amnesty International slams Qatar for not living up to promises to improve workers' rights and adds to a growing international criticism of Qatar's inability to properly implement adopted policies.*

World Cup host Qatar and FIFA are in public diplomacy terms back to square one with a just published Amnesty International report that takes the Gulf state to task for failing to implement lofty promises to significantly improve workers' working and living conditions and the world soccer body for not ensuring that Qatar lives up to international standards.

The report, [The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game](#), provides a damning assessment of the state of affairs five years after FIFA awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. Amnesty interviewed more than 200 labourers working on the refurbishment of the Khalifa International Stadium, one of eight planned facilities for the World Cup, and the Aspire Zone sports complex, a pillar of Qatar's sports infrastructure, who all complained about various violations of their human rights.

The report was published days after the International Labour Organization (ILO) put Qatar on notice that it no longer can delay acting on promises made in the wake of its successful bid to host the 2022 World Cup.

In a rare move, the [ILO threatened](#) to establish a Commission of Inquiry if Qatar fails to act in the coming year. Such commissions are among the ILO's most powerful tools to ensure compliance with international treaties. The UN body has only established [13](#) such commissions in its century-long history. The last such commission was created in 2010 to force Zimbabwe to live up to its obligations.

Earned goodwill could vanish

The report and the ILO warning are all the more embarrassing for Qatar given that its main competitor, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has already [adopted many of the adjustments of the kafala or sponsorship system](#) that puts workers at the mercy of their employers demanded by activists and is stepping up efforts to become the region's prime sports hub.

The report and the warning further threaten to erase considerable goodwill that Qatar built in the wake of its 2010 successful World Cup bid by breaking with the mould of Gulf states' refusal to engage with their critics, and holding out the promise of a more constructive relationship with international human rights groups and trade unions, and significant labour reform. Qatar became the only Gulf state to work with its critics rather than imprison them or bar them entry to the country as most of the region's other countries continue to do.

The Amnesty report constitutes however the first documentation of abuse on a World Cup-related site and punches holes into the assertion by the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, the World Cup's organizer which is chaired by Qatar emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, that its standards for the living and working conditions of migrant labour guard against abuse on construction sites related to the tournament.

FIFA also under fire

Amnesty takes the committee and the government to task for failing to ensure proper implementation of the standards that are written into all contracts signed by the committee since they were adopted in 2014 in consultation with Amnesty and other human rights and trade union groups.



It also charges that FIFA failed to do proper due diligence to identify and address human rights risks in Qatar in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. "FIFA did not put in place any measures to ensure that the people who would build the World Cup infrastructure in Qatar would not be subjected to human rights abuses. None of the publically available documentation on FIFA's award of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar contains any reference to labour exploitation or to ensuring that human rights of workers would be respected... Of even greater concern is the lack of action by FIFA in the last five years, during which time labour and human rights abuses experienced by construction workers in Qatar have been repeatedly exposed by the media, human rights groups and trades unions," the report said.

The human rights violations of migrant workers, who constitute a majority of the Qatar population, including interest-bearing recruitment loans, deception over pay rates and job descriptions, delayed wage payments, retention of passports, denial of rights to travel home, squalid living arrangements, excessive surveillance, and physical and verbal abuse by managers, amount to forced labour. The continued abuses violate the supreme committee's standards as well as limited legal and administrative measures adopted by the government to counter malpractice and reform the kafala system.

In [a statement](#), the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy insisted that it was “committed to ensuring the health, safety and well-being of every worker on World Cup projects.” It asserted that “the tone of Amnesty International’s latest assertions paint a misleading picture and do nothing to contribute to our efforts.”

The committee said Amnesty had interviewed workers of only four of the 40 companies involved in the refurbishment of the Khalifa stadium and that “the conditions reported were not representative of the entire work force on Khalifa.” The committee said that issues raised by Amnesty have since been addressed and that the companies involved had been penalized.

Qatar caught in a Catch-22

Nonetheless, at the root of Amnesty’s criticism of Qatar is the Gulf state’s failure to ensure implementation of its standards throughout the food chain. The companies indicted by Amnesty were sub- rather than prime contractors, the main committee’s main focus. The criticism however puts a finger on a fundamental Qatari problem in ensuring proper implementation of policies its adopts.

That failure is rooted in logistical issues – a small, enriched population reliant on migrant labour – and political dilemmas, first and foremost among which paralysis as a result of existential demographic fears. With a citizenry that accounts for only 12 percent of the population, many Qataris fear that any concession of rights to non-Qataris could ultimately undermine the national predominance of their culture and political control of their state and society.

As a result, Qatar is caught in a Catch-22 between sports, foreign and other policies designed to put the Gulf state in the international limelight and enhance its soft power and the attention and demands that those policies attract in terms of making good on projecting itself as a cutting-edge 21<sup>st</sup> century state.

Qatar’s inability to manage that dilemma turns its high-profile sporting efforts into a self-defeating enterprise. Despite billions of dollars of investment in its soft power strategy, of which sports is an important pillar, and five years of seeking to convince the world that it is on the right track, Qatar retains more of an image of an energy-rich slave state than of a small country that is successfully carving out its place as a good citizen of the international community.

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