

# Migrant laborers building 2022 World Cup facilities worked to death in Qatar

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4 October 2013

Deprived of their pay for months at a time, migrant construction workers building the facilities for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar are being worked to death under slave labor conditions.

Twenty-seven-year-old Ram Kumar Mahara, a construction worker at the 2022 World Cup building site, spoke to the *Guardian* about the brutal treatment he received when he complained about having to work with nothing to eat.

“We were working on an empty stomach for 24 hours; 12 hours’ work and then no food all night. When I complained, my manager assaulted me, kicked me out of the labor camp I lived in, and refused to pay me anything. I had to beg for food from other workers.”

Workers are housed under inhuman and overcrowded conditions, deprived of adequate food and water. Despite temperatures in the range of 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit), they are denied access to drinking water while working.

Employers also routinely retain migrant workers’ pay for months at a time, making it impossible for them to afford basic necessities.

Forty percent of all laborers in the country are from Nepal, one of Asia’s poorest countries. This summer, according to the *Guardian*, Nepalese workers in Qatar “have died at a rate of almost one a day,” with at least 44 dying between June 4 and August 8. According to Nepalese embassy documents, over half of the deaths resulted from heart attacks, heart failure or workplace accidents.

According to the Indian embassy, 82 Indian workers died between January and the end of June, and 1,460 more complained about labor conditions and consular problems. Over 700 Indians have died in the country between 2010 and 2012.

Qatar is expected to hire up to 1.5 million additional

workers to build the stadiums, roads, ports and hotels for the World Cup, spending a staggering \$200 billion. If fatalities persist at their current rate, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) told the *Guardian* that at least 4,000 migrant workers will be killed before the Cup begins. This is greater than the number of athletes expected to participate in the event itself.

No other country has a higher proportion of migrant workers than Qatar, where at least 90 percent of a workforce of about 1.7 million people consists of unskilled laborers from other countries.

The *kafala* (sponsorship) system practiced by Qatar and the other Gulf oil sheikhdoms ties migrant workers to their employers, leaving workers at their mercy. While Qatar has labor laws that limit working hours, provide for annual paid leave, require on-time monthly payment of wages, and set health and safety standards, these laws only apply to Qatari citizens. Most workers are excluded from these laws, however, due to their migrant worker status.

Foreign workers are tricked into paying exorbitant recruitment fees—up to US\$3,600—to come to Qatar on the promise of higher wages or better jobs. Once inside Qatar, employer-issued IDs provide them with their sole legal status. They cannot change jobs without their sponsoring employer’s permission, or leave the country without a sponsor-issued exit visa.

Under special circumstances, workers can obtain permission to leave the country from the Interior Ministry. However, in practice, employers can often successfully violate the sponsorship law by confiscating passports to prevent workers from escaping to their home countries. If a worker leaves his job for any reason without permission, moreover, his sponsor can report him as “absconding.”

Last year, Human Rights Watch published a report,

entitled *Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar Ahead of FIFA 2022*. The report notes that, “in the worst cases,” the conditions described by workers it interviewed “amounted to forced labor.”

The *Guardian* likewise pointed out that the working conditions in Qatari construction fit the definition of slavery as defined by the International Labour Organisation. Aidan McQuade, director of Anti-Slavery International, told the newspaper that conditions in Qatar “go beyond forced labor to the slavery of old where human beings were treated as objects. There is no longer a risk that the World Cup might be built on forced labor. It is already happening.”

Construction workers working to build the facilities for Qatar’s booming luxury tourist industry face similar conditions to those at building sites directly related to preparations for the World Cup event.

While US imperialism presents its Middle East policy as fighting for “democracy,” the extreme exploitation of workers by the Qatari monarchy, a close US ally, provide a window onto the class forces and oppressive social relations Washington actually encourages in the Middle East.

The US State Department celebrates the collaboration between the US and the Qatari monarchy, and praises Qatar for “support[ing] progress, stability and prosperity in the region” on its web site.

Qatari oil, gas and petrochemical industries, which provide 70 percent of government revenue, have grown up on the basis of trade and investment relationships with the United States. Qatar also houses the headquarters of United States Central Command, as well as the United States Air Force Central Command.

Qatar played a role in both Iraq wars and the war in Libya in 2011, and has sent \$3 billion in to Al Qaeda-linked US-backed opposition forces in Syria over the past two years.



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