Migrant workers clash with Saudi police amid mass deportation raids

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At least two people were killed and scores wounded as Saudi police clashed with protesting foreign workers in a district of the capital Riyadh this weekend.

A police statement said hundreds of people were arrested in the poor neighbourhood of Manfuhah, which has a large Ethiopian population.

On Sunday, thousands of mostly African workers gathered in the capital to prepare for repatriation. Last week, police rounded up thousands of migrant workers after an amnesty linked to new employment rules expired.

Officials said around 70 were injured and there were some 560 arrests. However, Ethiopian foreign affairs minister Tedros Adhanom said he had information that three Ethiopian citizens had been killed, one last Tuesday and two in the latest clashes. Adhanom said Addis Ababa had formally complained to Riyadh.

Hundreds of foreign workers were due to leave the Manfuhah district on Sunday. Police had arrested more than 16,000 people by the end of the second day of the crackdown as they fanned out across cities, raiding shops and construction sites, *al-Riyadh* newspaper reported on November 7.

The official *Saudi Press Agency* reported, citing a police statement, that the clashes also resulted in damages to 104 cars.

Vigilante Saudi residents in Manfuhah reportedly joined the fighting and even detained some Ethiopian workers. Witnesses said police surrounded the district while units from the National Guard and Special Forces were sent in.

Hundreds of African workers reportedly surrendered to police. A long line of buses took the workers to temporary housing along the airport road in Riyadh.

The clashes followed the authorities' implementation of measures against "violations" of the kingdom's labour laws. Last Monday, they began rounding up thousands of illegal foreign workers following the expiry of a seven-month amnesty for them to formalise their status. Buses were used to transport undocumented workers to centres for final exit visa processing and deportation.

Nearly a million Bangladeshis, Indians, Filipinos, Nepalis, Pakistanis and Yemenis are estimated to have left the country in the past three months. More than 30,000 Yemenis have reportedly crossed the border into Yemen in the past two weeks.

Four million other migrant workers obtained work permits before last Sunday's deadline.

Saudi Arabia has the largest economy in the Arab world. However, the authorities have recently begun to cite the 12 percent official unemployment rate in an attempt to justify driving out a portion of the migrant workers. Economic growth is forecast to slow to 4.2 percent this year, from 5.1 percent last year and 8.6 percent in 2011, according to a Bloomberg survey of 20 analysts.

Bloomberg recently noted, "The kingdom has made job creation a priority after popular unrest toppled leaders across the Middle East starting in 2011."

An estimated 9 million migrant workers reside and work in Saudi Arabia—more than half the workforce—filling mainly manual, clerical, and service jobs. Much of this work is conducted in appalling conditions for meagre, irregular pay. The living conditions of many foreign workers are of the worst kind, with many living in densely occupied shacks.

Last year, Saudi Arabia was the third largest global provider of worker remittances after the United States and Russia, sending US$29.5 billion in 2012, according to World Bank data.

The oil-rich kingdom has long functioned as the

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linchpin of social reaction in the region. During the mass uprisings that swept the Middle East in the wake of the Egyptian Revolution of January/February 2011, Riyadh sent its troops into neighbouring Bahrain to suppress the Shi'ite revolt there and prop up the ruling Sunni dynasty. Its overarching aim was to crush all protests before they spread to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, all of which face dissent—including from their own restive Shi'ite populations.

But Saudi Arabia faces increasing social and political conflicts, while its rulers no longer see a way to solve via their traditional alliance with the US. Defence takes almost a third of the Saudi budget. This is set to rise in line with the Kingdom's increasingly bellicose attitude towards Iran and covert funding of Sunni forces in Iraq and Syria.

In addition, Saudi Arabia is committed to paying most of the US$25 billion the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has pledged to buy off social discontent in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Oman.

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