

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar

Turning the spotlight on workers' rights

SUMMARY

Enormous natural gas resources have turned Qatar into one of the world's richest countries. The 11 610 km² nation currently has the fourth highest GDP per capita in the world. The absolute monarchy's estimated 340 000-350 000 citizens benefit from free education, free healthcare, virtually guaranteed – and well paid – employment, and pay almost no taxes. However, the great majority of the emirate's nearly 3 million inhabitants live in very different conditions. Qatar has the highest ratio of migrants in the world: 85 % of its population are migrants and 94 % of its workforce comes from abroad, mostly from south Asia and Africa. In contrast to the small percentage of expatriates from the West and other Gulf States, Asian and African migrants live and work in harsh conditions. Around 1 million are employed in construction, and 100 000 are domestic workers.

In December 2010, FIFA, world football's governing body, granted Qatar the right to host the 2022 World Cup, which is scheduled to take place from 21 November to 18 December. Expanding on an existing development programme enshrined in the [Qatar National Vision 2030](#), the country embarked on an extensive building programme to prepare for the World Cup, involving an estimated 1 million migrant workers. However, these preparations placed the spotlight on Qatar's poor treatment of migrant workers. In response to international pressure, Qatar has introduced important legal changes to improve the situation of these workers, which the EU has welcomed. However, according to human rights organisations, the country needs to take further steps to stop abuses. Of particular concern is the *kafala* sponsorship system, which is widely used throughout the six Gulf Cooperation Council States and gives disproportionate power to employers, leading to widespread abuse of migrant workers' rights. Even though Qatar has started to dismantle the *kafala* system, important elements remain in place. Moreover, ensuring compliance with more favourable labour laws remains a challenge. Since 2008, the European Parliament has adopted four resolutions addressing the situation of migrant workers in Qatar; it has called on Qatar to end the 'deplorable situation' of migrant workers and prevent preparations for the 2022 World Cup from being 'overshadowed by allegations of forced labour'.



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The political situation in Qatar

[Qatar](#) has been ruled by the Al Thani family since 1867. The current Emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, is [popular](#), for his role in steering the country through the [economic embargo](#) and political isolation imposed by other regional countries in 2017, for his management of the coronavirus pandemic, and for his expansion of the country's infrastructure as part of preparations for Doha's hosting of the 2022 World Cup. The emir holds all executive and legislative authority, and also controls the judiciary. Political parties are not permitted and, until October 2021, the only elections were for a [municipal council](#), a single body at national level advising the Ministry of Municipalities. On 2 October 2021, Qatari citizens voted in the country's first [legislative election](#), for the Advisory Council (*Majlis al-Shura*). Non-citizens, including expatriates and migrant workers as well as some stateless residents, have no political rights or electoral opportunities.

Migrant workers in Qatar

In 2013, soon after Qatar had been granted the right to host the 2022 World Cup, the country's population stood at nearly 2 million. The [International Trade Union Confederation](#) (ITUC) estimated at the time that around 500 000 to 1 million additional foreign construction workers would be needed to build an estimated US\$220 billion worth of hotels, stadiums, other facilities, and infrastructure by 2022. [Civil society groups](#) increased pressure on the Qatari government to ensure that all migrant workers, including those working in construction and the service sector, but also domestic workers, would be treated in accordance with international labour standards.

Qatar's international legal obligations

Qatar has been a member of the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) since 1972 and has ratified six conventions. These include five of the fundamental conventions, including the 1930 [ILO Forced Labour Convention](#), the 1957 [Abolition of Forced Labour Convention](#), and the 1947 [Labour Inspection Convention](#). In 2017, Qatar and the ILO started the first phase of a technical cooperation programme reflecting the joint commitment of both the government of Qatar and the ILO to ensure compliance with ratified international labour conventions and gradually achieve fundamental principles and rights at work in Qatar. In the [first phase of the programme](#), the focus was on: improving the payment of wages; enhancing labour inspection and occupational safety and health (OSH) systems; replacing the *kafala* sponsorship system and improving labour recruitment procedures; increasing prevention, protection and prosecution of forced labour; and promoting workers' voices. The ILO has described the changes that Qatar has introduced over the past four years as 'monumental'. The second phase of the programme will run until the end of 2023.

Domestic law

In 2018 and 2020, Qatar successively [removed](#) the need for most workers to obtain an exit permit to leave the country. In August 2020, Qatar introduced major changes to its labour market, ending the [requirement](#) for migrant workers to obtain their employer's permission to change jobs, while also becoming the first country in the region to adopt a non-discriminatory [minimum wage](#). In May 2021, Qatar also adopted [new rules](#) providing further protection to workers from heat stress, following reports that [thousands](#) of workers had died due to the extremely hot climate. Qatar also: set up [labour dispute resolution committees](#), designed to give workers a more efficient and faster way to pursue grievances against their employers; passed a law to establish a workers' support and insurance fund, partly designed to make sure workers are paid unclaimed wages when companies fail to pay; and introduced amendments that set stricter penalties for employers who fail to pay their workers' wages. [Human rights organisations](#) welcomed the legal changes introduced in 2020, calling them 'some of the most significant to date'. However, they also noted that the success of the significant labour reform measures would depend on how well the government enforces and

monitors them. Experts recognise that weak implementation and [enforcement](#) of the new provisions remain a challenge.

A year later, the same organisations [found](#) that migrant workers remain vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, due to 'inadequate implementation and oversight of current legal provisions'. According to these [organisations](#), until Qatar dismantles the *kafala* system in its entirety and allows migrant workers to join trade unions and advocate for their own rights, workers are likely to continue to suffer abuses and exploitation. [Wage abuse](#) continues to be a particular problem, as is the fact that workers still need to rely on [employers](#) to renew residency and work permits.

Human rights organisations are also [calling](#) for even greater efforts to protect workers from [heat stress](#), which [experts](#) believe to be the cause of death of many young and otherwise healthy migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, which include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The ILO has cited a drastic decline in heat-related disorders in 2021, which the organisation believes may be due, at least in part, to the new legislation adopted in May 2021. Qatar is the [only country](#) in the Gulf region to have introduced a [wet-bulb globe temperature](#) (WBGT) index, which takes into consideration ambient temperature, humidity, solar radiation and wind speed. In addition to generally prohibiting outside work at certain times of the day during the summer months, all work must stop if the WBGT rises beyond 32.1° Celsius. However, the ILO still [called](#) for better quality and more accurate data collection, with more efforts to investigate injuries and fatalities that may be work-related but are not currently categorised as such, to ensure workers and families receive compensation.

The *kafala* sponsorship system

The [kafala sponsorship system](#) is widely used in the GCC States, but application varies from country to country. Every non-citizen worker entering the country is linked to a particular job and becomes the responsibility of a citizen or company (a 'sponsor'). The sponsor can control a worker's entry, stay in the country and exit visa. Furthermore, sponsors are allowed to keep the passports of the workers they sponsor for certain periods, and often confiscate them altogether. The system can restrict the rights of migrants to change employer or jobs, keeping them trapped in employment situations where their rights to decent wages, overtime pay, adequate housing, freedom of movement and access to justice are not respected. [UN figures](#) put the number of migrant workers in the GCC States at 18 million. According to the ILO, the [2020 Qatari law](#) allowing employees to change jobs, coupled with the removal of exit permit requirements, effectively dismantles the *kafala* sponsorship system in Qatar and marks the beginning of a new era for the Qatari labour market. The EU [praised](#) Qatar for ending the requirement for migrant workers to obtain their employer's permission to change jobs, and for adopting a non-discriminatory minimum wage. During his visit to Qatar in [September 2021](#), the EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, also welcomed improvements in migrant workers' rights.

Foreign worker rights by host country in 2021 - What protection do *kafala* workers have?

Country	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Join unions	Yes	Yes	Yes	In some cases	No	No
Change job or quit without permission	After 1 year	After 1 year	No	Yes	In some cases	No
Leave country without permission	Yes	Yes	Yes	In most cases	No	Yes
Minimum wage	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

Source: Council on Foreign Relations, [What is the Kafala System?](#), March 2021.

Workers building World Cup sites

Large [sporting events](#) such as the football World Cup and Olympic Games can draw attention to and have an impact on human rights issues, including the rights of workers involved in construction and supply chains. International sports federations have recognised their role and responsibility in promoting human rights, by adopting strategies, appointing oversight committees and including human rights criteria in the bidding and selection process for host states. In 2017, FIFA established a [human rights policy](#) and, in October 2019, a joint [FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Sustainability Strategy](#). In the latter, FIFA and the Supreme Committee, the government body overseeing the 2022 World Cup, committed to safeguarding the rights and welfare of workers engaged on World Cup sites and promoting their rights in projects and supply chains directly linked to the World Cup. They pledged to leave behind 'a legacy of world class standards and practices for workers in Qatar'. Tournament organisers have worked with the BWI, an international trade union in the building and building materials industries, which has conducted independent inspections on FIFA World Cup sites. The BWI has [repeatedly stated](#) that the health and safety standards for FIFA World Cup workers are 'comparable' to western European or North American standards.

Nevertheless, in March 2021 Amnesty International [addressed FIFA](#) directly, calling for it to act to end all labour abuses in Qatar. Amnesty was able to [document](#) that workers building a prestigious stadium had not been paid for 7 months. In its [response](#) to Amnesty, FIFA explained that it had set up a 'robust human rights [due diligence process](#) to identify and address human rights risks associated with the World Cup 2022'. However, FIFA also acknowledged that improvements were still necessary.

The European Parliament

The European Parliament criticised what it called the 'deplorable situation' of migrant workers in two resolutions on EU trade relations with the GCC, adopted in [2008](#) and [2011](#). In November 2013, it adopted a [resolution](#) specifically addressing the situation of migrant workers in Qatar. In 2011, Parliament had already called for the abolition of the *kafala* system and reform of Qatar's labour law, including rights to form trade unions, to ensure full social and legal protection of migrant workers. In its 2013 resolution, Parliament welcomed the efforts made by the Qatari government to address this issue and appealed to FIFA to send a strong message to Qatar, 'to prevent preparations for the 2022 World Cup from being overshadowed by allegations of forced labour', and to EU corporations involved in the preparations to provide working conditions in line with international human rights standards. In 2015, in a [resolution](#) on high-level corruption cases in FIFA, Parliament once more expressed concern about the situation of migrant workers in Qatar building infrastructure for the World Cup. Parliament specifically mentioned the *kafala* system, describing it as forced labour, dangerous working conditions, being forced to work in extreme heat 6 days a week, and being forced to live in overcrowded and squalid labour camps. Parliament called on Qatar to ratify, legislate for, and enforce fundamental labour rights. In 2014, Parliament held a [hearing](#) on sports and human rights in Qatar, with the participation of the ILO, FIFA, the ITUC, the International Federation of Professional Footballers and Amnesty International.

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