

EU must hold Qatar to account for World Cup deaths

By Willy Fautré

EU Observer (16.05.2019) - <http://bit.ly/2JHIuPt> - Qatar is due to defend its human rights record at the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva this week, with concerns surrounding their treatment of World Cup workers likely to come to the fore.

The EU has a unique opportunity to push its labour rights agenda in the Gulf state, with the tournament throwing the country's dismal record on migrant workers firmly into the spotlight.

Concerns around Qatar's suitability to host the tournament have abounded since the shock decision to award them the competition in 2010.

Allegations of bribery, extreme heat rendering football matches unsafe and a total lack of footballing pedigree have all been cited as arguments against their right to host.

However, of all of these concerns, the country's appalling human rights record is chief amongst these.

This has been tragically borne out in the deaths of hundreds of workers, labouring to make the tiny Gulf emirate ready to host the world's biggest sporting event.

The Trade Union Confederation estimates that if conditions don't improve, at least 4,000 workers will have died on the job by the time the competition kicks off.

This will be FIFA's most damning black mark to date in an already deeply troubling copybook.

For years, European Parliamentary and Commission figures have repeatedly expressed concerns about these issues.

On several occasions, Federica Mogherini, EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, has been the bloc's leading voice of criticism.

It is now time for the EU to step up where footballing authorities have failed and hold Qatar to account for its shameful treatment of migrant labourers.

Last December, Qatar's government announced that it had committed to align its labour laws with international standards and to change the notorious kafala system.

At the same time, the president of Qatar's National Human Rights Committee (NHRC), Ali Bin Smaikh Al-Marri, declared in an [interview with Euronews](#) that the sponsorship law had been abolished and had been replaced with "a contract-based system in which a worker can move to a new job after the expiration of his contract."

He added that the new law provides [better protection of domestic workers](#) as it "sets out working hours, weekly rest days, and annual leave as with all workers and employees."

Little change

Whilst this all sounded promising, many of these changes have failed to become reality.

Earlier this year, Amnesty International said the Qatari authorities were "still failing the country's millions of migrant workers." Almost nothing has actually changed for those on the ground.

There are also a number of additional concerns about gaps in even these pledged, yet undelivered, reforms.

During their contracted periods, workers will not be able to change their jobs without written consent from their employer.

Some migrants are also excluded from the lifting of the exit visa, including all those who work in the public sector and domestic workers.

The right to strike is not recognised and it can be recalled that [in 2014 a hundred migrant workers were arrested](#) and threatened with deportation because they went on strike to protest flagrant breaches of employment contracts and the non-payment of wages by their employers.

There is no greater power in the world of football than Europe.

Home to the world's biggest stars and most successful teams, Europeans hold clout unrivalled by any other corner of the footballing world. It is therefore vital that the European Union use this clout and steps up at this week's review to demand Qatar implement essential labour reforms immediately.

This cannot turn into another round of warm words and half-hearted promises. The integrity of the world's greatest footballing spectacle is a stake and far more importantly, the lives of hundreds of migrant workers depends on it.