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## **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.

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## **Qatar covered up the death of 1200 workers**

Gulf News (14.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GtrHO2> - Several human rights groups have accused a Qatari self-styled rights advocate and his government panel of covering up the death of more than 1,200 migrant workers while building sports facilities for hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

The Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK and Europe, the African Human Rights Heritage, and the Gulf Association for Rights and Freedom have said they filed a joint complaint against Ali Bin Samikh Al Marri, the secretary general of Qatar's National Human Rights Committee.

They also accused Al Marri of taking advantage of his panel to whitewash Qatar's image and wasting the small emirate's money for "politicising" rights issues.

The complaint has been lodged with several international institutions, including the Global Alliance for National Human Rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Committee at the European Union and the world football body, the FIFA.

The three watchdogs have asked the Global Alliance for National Human Rights to open an inquiry on Al Marri's complicity and ensure he and his panel will not escape punishment, they said in a press statement.

"We call for opening a transparent and impartial investigation into abuses against migrant workers in Qatar," they added.

The three groups said they will soon give a press conference in Geneva to launch a campaign entitled "Disclosing Facts in Qatar".

Their complaint was made public as a conference against impunity, organised by the Qatar's National Human Rights Committee, started Sunday in Doha.

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## **Exploitation of North Korean Workers in Qatar by Pyongyang: Good practice of a company**

***Human Rights Without Frontiers hails the behavior of Construction Development  
Company (CDC)***

*Memo between construction company and DPRK embassy representative*

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWH (22.10.2015) - According to Voice of America (VOA), **Construction Development Company (CDC)** fired 90 of its 192 North Korean workers on 7<sup>th</sup> May.

The decision by Qatar's Construction Development Company (CDC) came after repeated violations of local laws and regulations by the workers and their inhumane treatment by their supervisors, according to the minutes of a meeting between representatives of the company and North Korean officials that were exclusively obtained by the Voice of America (VOA) Korean Service.

The company asked the North Korean officials to provide the names of workers to be repatriated by 4<sup>th</sup> May. In the minutes dated on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, the company cited a series of violations and misconduct by the North Korean workers and their supervisors. The two-page document has names and signatures of four North Korean officials who participated in the meeting.

The company had initially tried to fire all the North Korean workers, but later reduced their number at the request of North Korean officials. The remaining workers were allowed to stay on condition that they do not take part in any rules violations, including misbehavior at the working site, non-compliance of health and safety procedures,

working at other construction sites and disobeying local laws. The amount of the wages and the payment procedure were not part of the agreement.

This deal was however not respected by the North Korean side. At the end of August, CDC fired its entire North Korean workforce for repeated violations of the company's rules and inhumane treatment of the workers by their North Korean supervisors.

CDC took the action after learning that the employees who worked during the day at the CDC site were then sent by their supervisors to another construction site at night and were forced to overwork. The company also suspected that supervisors might have confiscated workers' wages.

North Korean workers are contracted with local construction companies through a North Korean recruitment firm in Qatar: **Genco**, created in 2010 from the merging of **Sudo Construction** and **Namgang Construction**. The firms are all managed by **North Korea's External Construction Bureau**. Some of the workers are soldiers dispatched by North Korea to earn cash. Sudo and Gunmyung were the first companies to import North Korean work force in Qatar in 2003; they were followed by Genco in 2010.

CDC builds luxury hotels and government facilities in Qatar, with its annual revenue amounting to \$300 million. The company requires all its employees and associate companies to adhere to international labor and ethics rules.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* hails the efforts of Construction Development Company (CDC) to try to meet the international labor standards.

This year, there were about 3,000 North Korean laborers in Qatar. Some defectors said that their monthly salary was \$100 while Genco was receiving \$750 per worker, an amount that was transferred to Pyongyang.

North Korea first began sending overseas workers in 1967 after signing a bilateral trade agreement with Russia. Since then, it has expanded the scope of its labor exports to Africa in the 1970s, followed by the Middle East in the 1990s. According to research by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a total of 45 countries have at one time employed North Korean workers and around 50,000 are currently working in at least 16 countries. The global income for the state is between USD 1.2 – 2.3 billion per year.

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## **Qatar arrests 100 striking workers for deportation**

ITUC (26.11.2014) <http://www.ituc-csi.org/qatar-arrests-100-striking-workers?lang=en> - The ITUC has condemned Qatar's arrest and planned deportation of around 100 striking migrant workers today as a gross violation of the most fundamental workers' rights.

According to local news website Doha News, "The men, who hail from Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, are construction workers employed by two subcontracting companies – Qatar Freelance Trading and Contracting as well as Qatar Middle East Co. They worked on construction sites that included the recently renovated Sheraton Doha hotel."

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said, "Qatar's brutal disregard for migrant workers is on display once again. The 'labour reforms' promised by the authorities add up to nothing, and FIFA, the athletics body IAAF, multinationals and others which are getting a free ride on the back of modern slavery in Qatar should be ashamed to be in league with a dictatorship like this."

Around 800 workers in total have been on strike over the past few days, in protest at breaches of employment contracts and poverty wages. Having signed contracts before leaving their home countries for Qatar, on arrival in Doha their passports were confiscated and contracts torn up. They were then forced to work for wages one-third lower than promised. Witnesses have reported that a supervisor attacked workers with a plastic pipe when police arrived to start the arrests, and those arrested are believed to be heading for the notorious Doha Detention Centre where migrant workers are often held incommunicado for long periods before eventual deportation.

"This is what life without the right to strike looks like. It is deeply troubling that employer groups are now trying to undermine that very right at the International Labour Organisation. The world needs to uphold rights, and not put every worker at the mercy of their employer with no right to strike against exploitation and abuse, like in Qatar," said Burrow.

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## **Qatar and FIFA must act now to stop the deaths of migrant workers and resolve labour rights issues**

Asian Human Rights Commission (27.03.2014) - Qatar, in its desperate rush to host 2022 FIFA World Cup, has emerged as a new killing field for migrant workers mainly from South Asia. With the death toll having gone beyond 1200 already and estimated to reach a staggering high of 4000 before the first ball is kicked in the event opener, it could be nothing else. These deaths have reportedly come from forcing the workers involved in various projects related to the event to work and live in extreme inhuman conditions. The International Trade Union Confederation, for example, had exposed many cases of systemic abuse of migrant labour like forced labour in harsh climatic conditions leading to sudden strokes, withholding access to water even when temperature exceed 50 degree Celsius, confiscation of their passports to prevent them from escaping and so on.

The only thing worse than the deaths is the silence maintained by the world community over the issue despite of it being in the public domain. Just to cite an example, a report in The Guardian elaborated upon the unfolding horror almost a year ago in 2013. The report grimly noted that "his summer, Nepalese workers died at a rate of almost one a day in Qatar, many of them young men who had sudden heart attacks. The investigation found evidence to suggest that thousands of Nepalese, who make up the single largest group of labourers in Qatar, face exploitation and abuses that amount to modern-day slavery, as defined by the International Labour Organisation, during a building binge paving the way for 2022. According to documents obtained from the Nepalese embassy in Doha, at least 44 workers died between 4 June and 8 August. More than half died of heart attacks, heart failure or workplace accidents."

The issue was raised even in the European parliament with the officialdom of FIFA in attendance. Similar were the data available with the embassies of the countries these workers came from. Numbers available with Indian embassy in Doha, for example, put the Indian casualties at 771 while Nepal pegged the same at 385. The forced labour comes from the kafala system prevailing in Qatar for contractual migrant workers. For the uninitiated, workers are tied to their employer and not allowed to change jobs or leave the country without permission under this modern incarnation of slavery.

Despite the unfolding saga, none of the stakeholders from the state of Qatar and the native countries of the migrant workers to FIFA took even the responsibility for the deaths, forget unleashing steps to arrest them immediately. FIFA president Sepp Blatter,

in fact, came closest, even if after much criticism from the international trade union and human rights community, to own up that it has 'some responsibility' for workers constructing venues for 2022 World Cup in Qatar even while asserting that it 'cannot interfere in the rights of the workers'. He then held that the living and working conditions of the migrant labor force remained primarily a responsibility of the state of Qatar and secondly of the companies employing them. He did acknowledge that FIFA can help 'resolve this problem through Football' though he did not elaborate how and when. The emptiness of his words, though, is betrayed by a similar in tone, but clearer in meaning, statement of Theo Zwanzinger, Germany's member of the FIFA executive who conceded that the working conditions in Qatar are "absolutely unacceptable" but argued that any attempts of shifting the event would be 'counterproductive'.

The state of Qatar, on the other hand, shrugged the deaths off with an abandon befitting dictatorial regimes. Faced with hard questions, it first went into denial mode and made absurd claims like the numbers of deaths among the Indian community are normal because of their huge numbers. After facing flak for the same, it went on a course correction mode and enacted a Migrant Workers Welfare Charter. The charter pledges that strict standards of health and safety, equal treatment will be taken care of. Another issue was that of payment of wages and confiscation of passports, all of which the government stated will be taken care of. The Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee further asserted that the safety, security, health and dignity of workers -- be they professionals or construction workers -- is of paramount importance to it and committed to change working conditions to ensure a lasting legacy of improved worker welfare.

The promises, however, turned out to be nothing more than cosmetic measures as the charter it had drafted 'in close consultation with the International Labor Organization' will apply only on the companies directly building World Cup venues and thereby leaving a humongous section of the migrant workers employed in wider infrastructure projects that are required to handle an influx of players, fans and media.

With both the Kingdom of Qatar and FIFA being cash-surplus, there is no dearth of funds to improve the conditions and stop the deaths immediately. To have an idea of the expenditure on the event, 2011 estimations of the cost of the event were pegged at an astounding \$220 billion, about 60 times the \$3.5 billion that South Africa spent on the World Cup in 2010.

It is in this context that the inexplicably high death rate of the migrant workers must become an immediate concern for all stakeholders, from hosts and FIFA to the fans. This is high time to assert that no sports event can be bigger than lives of even one death, forget thousands perishing in Qatar. To put things in perspective not a single accidental death had taken place on the construction sites of London Olympics for instance and there is no reason why Qatar and FIFA can be excused for so many.

Thus while all the hype focuses on the hot climatic conditions which would take a toll on the various football teams that would be playing in the World Cup, it is time to take stock of the migrant workforce working in harsh weather conditions, endangering their lives. FIFA which decided to go ahead with its decision to hold a world cup in Qatar, despite perceiving it as a 'risk', is not blame free, it does not own 'some responsibility'; it is fully liable for mounting death toll in Qatar.

The AHRC together with various civil society and labour right organizations calls upon both Qatar and FIFA to act immediately and ensure that no more lives are lost. The AHRC also urges upon Qatar to go for overall labour reforms guaranteeing living wages and the right to collective bargaining for workers.

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## **More than 450 Indians died in Qatar in the last two years**

***The embassy did not give details about the circumstances of the deaths or where they occurred***

Gulf News (17.02.2014) - More than 450 Indian migrants working in Qatar have died in the last two years, data shows as the Gulf state is under pressure over its rights record ahead of the 2022 World Cup.

In response to a Right to Information request filed, the Indian embassy in Qatar gave figures detailing the number of deaths in 2012 and the first 11 months of 2013.

On average about 20 migrants died per month, peaking at 27 in August last year. There were 237 fatalities in 2012 and another 218 in 2013 up to December 5.

The embassy did not give details about the circumstances of the deaths or where they occurred.

It also declined to hand over any correspondence between the embassy and the Indian government regarding the treatment of its nationals.

Qatar's human rights record is under scrutiny like never before as it cranks up building work ahead of the 2022 World Cup, most of which will be done by migrant labour from South Asia.

Amnesty International said in November that workers were being treated like "animals," and urged football's world governing body Fifa to press Qatar to improve conditions for foreign labourers.

Fifa executive committee member Theo Zwanziger said last Thursday that the World Cup could help improve the country's "appalling" human rights record by inviting closer scrutiny.

The *Guardian* reported at the weekend that 400 Nepalese migrants had died on building sites in Qatar as it prepares for football's biggest tournament, which it won the right to host in 2010.

It did not specify the period for the deaths, but it said human rights organisation Pravasi Nepali Co-ordination Committee would give more details this week.

On February 11, the Gulf state issued new guidelines aimed at protecting expatriate workers, suggesting they should be paid properly and promptly and housed adequately.

The embassy in Qatar says that the exact number of Indians in Qatar is unknown, but it was estimated at close to 500,000 at the end of 2012, about 26 per cent of Qatar's total population.

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## **Qatar World Cup: 185 Nepalese died in 2013**

***Death toll in 2013 likely to rise as new cases revealed, sparking fresh wave of concern over treatment of migrant workers***

The Guardian (24.01.2014) - The extent of the risks faced by migrant construction workers building the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup in [Qatar](#) has been laid bare by official documents revealing that 185 Nepalese men died last year alone.

The 2013 death toll, which is expected to rise as new cases come to light, is likely to spark fresh concern over the treatment of migrant workers in Qatar and increase the pressure on [Fifa](#) to force meaningful change. According to the documents the total number of verified deaths among workers from [Nepal](#) – just one of several countries that supply hundreds of thousands of migrant workers to the gas-rich state – is now at least 382 in two years alone. At least 36 of those deaths were registered in the weeks following the global outcry after the [Guardian's original revelations in September](#).

The revelations forced Fifa's president, [Sepp Blatter](#), to promise that football would not turn a blind eye to the issue following a stormy executive committee meeting. Qatar's ministry of labour hired law firm DLA Piper to conduct an urgent review and Hassan al-Thawadi, chief executive of the World Cup organising committee, said the findings would be treated with the utmost seriousness, vowing that the tournament would not be built "on the blood of innocents". The DLA Piper report is expected to be published in the coming weeks.

The Nepalese make up about a sixth of Qatar's 2 million-strong population of migrant workers. Verified figures for the 2013 death rates among those from [India](#), [Pakistan](#), [Sri Lanka](#) and elsewhere have yet to emerge.

The Nepalese organisation working with the families of dead workers to repatriate their bodies and campaign for adequate compensation from the companies that employed them under the *kafala* sponsorship system said on Friday that Fifa should do more.

The [Pravasi Nepali Co-ordination Committee](#) (PNCC), which has cross-checked the figures from official sources in Doha against death certificates and passports, is still receiving new cases on a regular basis. The Guardian has seen evidence of at least a further eight cases, which would take the 2013 total to 193.

The PNCC called on Fifa's sponsors to reconsider their relationship with world football's governing body, which awarded the World Cup to Qatar in December 2010.

"Fifa and the government of Qatar promised the world that they would take action to ensure the safety of workers building the stadiums and infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup. This horrendous roll call of the dead gives the lie to those reassurances," said the PNCC. "These were young or otherwise able-bodied men, with their futures in front of them, families at home and everything to live for. Many have been literally worked to death. Some have met with even more sinister ends. All have been betrayed by Fifa."

The [Guardian investigation](#) last year revealed that at least 44 Nepalese workers had died in Qatar between 4 June and 8 August, more than half of them of heart attacks, heart failure or workplace accidents. But the full list of deaths recorded during the year, collated by the Nepalese NGO from official sources and documents in Doha and seen by the Guardian, shows that the actual figure is much higher.

In June, July and August alone 65 deaths were recorded by the PNCC during summer months when temperatures can regularly top 40C. The causes included traffic accidents, blunt injuries and fractures ascribed to falls and suicide. But more than 65 of the deaths in 2013 are ascribed to "sudden cardiac arrests" and more than half to some kind of heart failure. Campaigners believe the cause of death is often officially listed as a cardiac arrest because it covers a "multitude of sins".

Asked last year by the Guardian why so many young Nepalese men died of heart attacks, the Qatari labour ministry said: "This question would be better suited for the relevant health authorities or the government of Nepal."

As long ago as 2011, Fifa said it would work with the International Trade Union Confederation to address labour issues with the Qatari authorities. "We have a responsibility that goes beyond the development of football and the organisation of our competition," Fifa secretary general Jérôme Valcke said in November 2011.

But the ITUC has remained a strident critic of the lack of progress made by Qatari authorities on the issue, while groups including [Human RightsWatch](#) and Amnesty International have continued to highlight the appalling conditions suffered by some of the workers in a £137bn construction boom.

In November, Amnesty warned in a damning report that workers were enduring 12-hour days in sweltering conditions and living in squalid, overcrowded accommodation. The ITUC has warned that up to 4,000 workers may die before a ball is kicked in 2022 without meaningful reform of the *kafala* system and stringent control of the myriad construction companies and sub-contractors involved.

After the global outcry that followed the Guardian's coverage, Blatter travelled to meet the Emir of Qatar and declared it was "on the right track" in dealing with the issue. But following a meeting with the ITUC in Zurich a month later, Fifa said that "fair working conditions with a lasting effect must be introduced quickly".

The PNCC, which has painstakingly cross-checked death certificates and other documentation with official records in Doha, said Fifa and the Qatari government needed to move faster: "Fifa president Sepp Blatter said in October there was 'plenty of time' to address this issue. For the labourers dying every week in Qatar to build the infrastructure to host Mr Blatter's World Cup, there is no time left."

Attention is also turning to the role of Fifa's sponsors, with the PNCC joining calls for them to review their relationship with it. Visa and Adidas recently signed new deals until 2022. "Qatar's failure to disclose or explain these deaths, and Fifa's failure to monitor them, are alarming in the extreme. We call upon the World Cup's corporate sponsors – Coca-Cola, Adidas, Visa, Hyundai and Budweiser – urgently to review their arrangements with Fifa," a spokesman said.

Last month the London mayor, [Boris Johnson](#), travelled to Doha to drum up trade for British business. Foreign Office minister Hugh Robertson held talks with the Qataris aimed at boosting trade and said the UK would "offer support" in delivering the 2022 World Cup.

A spokesman for the Foreign Office insisted the issue of migrant workers was also raised. "Mr Robertson discussed the issue of migrant workers with the Qatari authorities during his recent visit," he said.

But the PNCC said that the flow of coffins returning to Kathmandu airport, which continued throughout December, even on Christmas Day, told its own story. "Thanks to the work of the Guardian and other media, this abuse is finally being exposed," said the PNCC spokesman.

"We call upon civilised governments as a matter of the greatest urgency to demand that Qatar takes meaningful action to protect foreign workers on its soil – including reform of the *kafala* system of labour, which encourages employers to treat their workers as property rather than human beings."

The full list of deaths recorded between January and September 2012, also seen by the Guardian, shows that at least 127 Nepalese nationals died during that period and there are believed to have been at least another 70 fatalities during the final three months of that year.

Qatar is spending huge sums at home and abroad in an attempt to position itself as the diplomatic and business hub of the Middle East and secure its position politically and financially for the years ahead.

Qatari officials insist moves are being made to hold construction companies, and their myriad sub-contractors, to existing labour laws, which they argue are among the strongest in the region.

Qatar's under-secretary to the ministry of labour, Hussain al-Mulla, has said that at least 99% of businesses are complying with the law. The ministry of labour says it is "committed to ensuring that all workers are treated in a fair and just manner".

The Qatar 2022 supreme committee, which is responsible for staging the World Cup and recently began work on its first stadium, pointed to its own workers' charter and said it was "committed to the wellbeing, health, safety, security and dignity of every worker".

"We anticipate 2014 being a big year for the supreme committee in terms of delivery, with up to five stadiums in various stages of construction. With this in mind, and as an evolution of the charter, we have worked hard to develop detailed workers' standards which will be enforced across all Qatar 2022 projects," a Qatar 2022 statement said.

"It has been our commitment and our belief from the first day of our bid to host the Fifa World Cup that we can utilise the power of football to accelerate positive social and human development across our country and our region."

In a statement Fifa said: "Fifa is working towards an urgent solution and as such is continuing to actively engage the dialogue between Qatar and various human rights and labour organisations to ensure that the initiated changes to improve the welfare of migrants workers are progressing with the necessary pace.

"The application of international norms of behaviour is a principle and part of all our activities and expected from any host of our events.

"Fifa firmly believes in the positive power that the Fifa World Cup can have in Qatar as a platform for positive social change, including an improvement of labour rights and conditions for migrant workers."

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## **Outrageous life sentence for 'Jasmine poet'**

Amnesty International (29.01.2013) - A life sentence handed today to a Qatari poet has all the hallmarks of an outrageous betrayal of free speech, Amnesty International has said.

Mohammed al-Ajami, also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb, was tried on charges of incitement "to overthrow the ruling system", and "insulting the Amir".

He was arrested in November 2011 following the publication of his "Jasmine Poem", which broadly criticized governments across the Gulf region, saying "we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite".

"It is deplorable that Qatar, which likes to paint itself internationally as a country that promotes freedom of expression, is indulging in what appears to be such a flagrant abuse of that right," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

A copy of the verdict obtained by Amnesty International makes no reference to the reasons for such a harsh sentence, but the organization understands that the charges on which he was convicted were based on the content of his poetry.

"All the information available points to Mohammed al-Ajami being a prisoner of conscience who has been placed behind bars solely for his words. Accordingly, he should be released immediately and his conviction quashed," said Philip Luther.

The verdict has sent out shock waves among activists in Qatar and the Gulf region, who have told Amnesty International that the sentence feels like a threat to them all.

One activist commented that al-Ajami's trial was a "trial of the Arab Spring" and a warning against its spread to the Gulf.

"We expected better from Qatar," said the activist, referring to the country's talk of parliamentary elections and freedom of expression.

Qatar is the headquarters of media organization Al-Jazeera, which has won plaudits for its reports on uprisings throughout the region in the last two years. However, Qatar has strictly controlled press freedoms and freedom of expression with regard to criticism of its own government.

Observers were not allowed to enter the court, and al-Ajami himself was not present at the sentencing. He is expected to appeal.