

**Remarks by  
Mr Gilbert F. Houngbo, Deputy Director General  
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International Labour Office**

**At the Subcommittee on Human Rights  
European Parliament**

**Hearing on Sport and Human Rights  
Focussing on the situation of migrant workers in  
Qatar**

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*(889 words)*

Madam Chair,

Distinguished Members of Parliament,

**1-Thank you** for inviting the ILO to this important initiative and for giving me the floor.

**2-** Following **recent events and complaints** coupled with a sense of urgency due to the **preparations of the 2022 World Cup**, the **ILO Director General**, Mr Guy Ryder and the **Minister of Labour and Social Affairs** of Qatar<sup>1</sup> met in **October 2013**.

**3-** On that occasion, the **Minister recognized** that there were **legitimate concerns with regard to labour issues** in Qatar and the **need for a decisive turn around**.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Abdullah Saleh Mubarak Al-Khulaifi

**4-** As a **follow-up** to this meeting, I led a **mission** to Qatar in early **December 2013**. **Meetings** were held with various **Ministries and institutions of the Government** as well as with the **Chamber of Commerce**.

**5-** I raised with the Government **concerns** relating to the **seriousness of allegations reaching the ILO** concerning **unacceptable practices** mainly affecting **migrant workers including domestic workers**. They include:

- **recruitment practices**, including the withholding of passports and preventing workers from changing employers;
- **unacceptable working and living conditions**, including the absence of a minimum wage, delays in salary payment; and
- other **human rights violations** at the workplace.

**6- Beyond these concerns, what came out very clearly in the conversations during the mission, was a recognition by the Qatari authorities of issues that needed to be addressed, and the importance of a clear and strong commitment by the Government to address them.**

**7- Madam Chair, the Qatari authorities have shown good will. Some immediate actions have been taken including:**

- changes in the law to put an end to passports withholding (though the enforcement of the law is a challenge),**
- construction of workers' villages, and**
- measures to end delays in salaries payment.**

**But, quite frankly, more decisive actions are needed.**

**8- Based on ILO's expertise and experience, we are firmly of the view that the solution has to come from an integrated approach in line with the Qatar National**

Development Strategy which includes a major section on migrant workers. This **implies working simultaneously** on different issues:

- 1) **Migration governance;**
- 2) **Labour market governance;**
- 3) **Harmonisation of policy and regulatory frameworks; and**
- 4) **A commitment to relevant international labour standards including freedom of association; collective bargaining; elimination of forced or compulsory labour; abolition of child labour; elimination of discrimination in employment; and relevant United Nations human rights instruments.**

**9-** For us, we should **avoid a pick and choose approach**, given the **interdependence and interrelation** of the various dimensions of the issues, while **recognizing** that **some actions desperately**

needed may take longer than others to yield significant and durable results.

**10-** At this juncture, I would like to make a reference to the **Workers' Charter unveiled earlier this week by the Supreme Committee**. The document covers, among others: **recruitment; employment contract; salaries; health and safety requirements; working and living conditions and repatriation.**

**11-** While these elements are relevant and may go some way in addressing some of the issues being raised in different fora - and I salute here the **Resolution** adopted on 21 November 2013 by the **European Parliament** on the situation of Migrant workers in Qatar. I would also like now to highlight **2 critical concerns of the ILO:**

- 1) The essential nexus between actions taken by the Supreme Committee and actions required from the Government. For instance, proposals by the**

**Supreme Committee regarding the withholding of passports or repatriation will not be effective if the Government does not translate them into national legislation and does not put in place national mechanisms to enforce the law.**

**2) The critical importance for workers to have a voice without fear of retaliation.**

**Madam Chair, new measures for ethical recruitment or health and safety can be put in place. But, if workers do not have a way of expressing problems without fear, those measures will not be effective.** If workers do not have a mean to raise issues happening on the ground, you can have auditing mechanisms but the reports will not reflect the reality.

**12- Without due account taken of these matters, we, in the ILO, believe all these measures will be ineffective. This is why we insist on an integrated approach.**

**13- The ILO's Constitution allows for different types of complaints that can be filed against a Member State.**

In this regard, there is currently -before ILO supervisory bodies- a complaint concerning alleged serious breaches of forced labour. Another case relates to the issue of discrimination against migrant workers and has also been under examination by the ILO Committee of Experts. Also, a case alleging violation of freedom of association principles is currently before the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association. Both cases are expected to be considered by the ILO Governing Body at its session this coming March.

**14- To conclude, Madam Chair, Distinguished Members of the European Parliament, allow me to recall here, that in early 2000, Qatar had to face child labour issues with children used as camel jockeys. With a clear commitment and will from the Qatari**

**authorities and with ILO's technical support, Qatar successfully eliminated child jockeys and replaced them by robots. So we strongly believe that with a clear commitment of the Qatari authorities, the ILO stands ready to work with all relevant stakeholders to overcome current challenges.**

**Thank you**

#### **Pour Mémoire**

**Qatar has ratified 5 of the 8 ILO fundamental Conventions: namely, the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) as well as**

**the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81) in addition to the 5 fundamental conventions.**