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# UNION VIEW

ITUC International Trade Union Confederation  
May 2011



→ Matilde Gattoni

## Hidden faces of the Gulf miracle

Behind the gleaming cities of Doha (Qatar) and Dubai (UAE), stories of migrant workers with few rights and inhuman living conditions.

# Migrant worker misery lies behind gleaming towers of Gulf cities



→ Matilde Gattoni

It's hard not to be impressed by a first sight of the gleaming new cities springing out of the desert coast of the Persian Gulf.

Dubai oozes glamour and bristles with superlatives: the world's tallest building, most luxurious hotels and biggest shopping malls and vast artificial islands.

In Doha, an ongoing building boom is poised to move up several gears as work kicks off on a massive infrastructure programme in preparation for the 2022 World Cup.

The downtown skyline of Qatar's capital already glistens like a Middle Eastern Manhattan across the bay from the iconic architecture of its new Museum of Islamic Art.

What the tourists, sports fans and business travellers jetting in to the Gulf states may not see are the millions of migrant workers whose toil continues to build the new towers, shopping centres, hotels, stadiums and museums sprouting across these Arabian boomtowns.

The army of men from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Somalia and a slew of other developing countries has been lured to the oil-rich nations of the Gulf on a promise of fat wages. Far from the air-conditioned malls and beachfront condos, they inhabit overcrowded barrack-like housing, in sprawling, dust-clogged, male-only suburbs like Dubai's notorious Sonapur or the Industrial Area on the outskirts of Doha.

Bussed home exhausted after long hours working in often blistering heat, the men are squeezed into up to ten to a room in company accommodation. Food is basic, sanita-

tion often rudimentary and air-conditioning when it exists is sometimes ineffectual when summer temperatures soar over 40°C. Many work at dangerous jobs with little or no health insurance.

The migrant workers are nothing if not resistant. Many say they are willing to put up with the heat and harsh conditions for the chance to support their families with wages way beyond what they can earn at home. All too often however, salaries are paid months overdue.

Conned by unscrupulous recruitment agents, workers arrive in the Gulf to discover they are paid considerably less than they were promised back in their homelands, leaving the traumatised migrants struggling to pay off the debts they ran up to fund their passage to the Gulf let alone provide for their struggling families.

*"These are the people who made this country, who transformed the desert into a beautiful city and now they are living like this,"* says Saaed\* a Pakistani driver visiting friends living 10 to a room in a slum area beneath the towers of Dubai's swanky financial district.

*"There are people here who are not getting paid for several months... their families are expecting them to send something back, but there's nothing. They are desperate."*

The migrants have few chances of escaping from abusive employers. A system known as Kafala binds foreign workers to the local companies that sponsored their travel to the Gulf nations.

The workers need their employers' authorization to switch job, and companies frequently hold migrants' passports to ensure they don't leave the country before the end of their contracts. Governments in both Qatar and the UAE have taken steps recently to improve the migrants' situation, but application of new laws is patchy, and lengthy court procedures can leave the workers waiting for months without pay when they do seek legal redress.

In desperation at ill-treatment or unpaid wages, some migrants simply abscond. They find themselves in limbo, banned from legal work in their host nation and without the papers or funds to secure a passage home.

Ali, a tailor from the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, has been earning a pittance working in the black market for over a year-and-a-half since running away from a sponsor who refused to pay his wages.

*"I went to the company to get my passport but they refused,"* he explains as he stands in line for a ladle of vegetable curry and yellow rice from a backstreet soup kitchen run by a local charity. *"Now, I just want to go home."*

Trade unions are effectively banned under the laws of the UAE and Qatar, so migrant workers have little chance to organize protest against their conditions.

When they do, they can expect a harsh response. Some 3,000 workers at the giant Arabtec construction company struck in January for an increase in monthly salaries that were reportedly as low 650 dirham (\$175). The authorities' response was uncompromising. Seventy Bangladeshi workers accused of instigating the strike were arrested and, according to Bangladeshi authorities, deported from Dubai.

*"We intend to deport the workers whose involvement is proven,"* Col Mohammed al Mur, director general of the Dubai Police General Department of Legal and Disciplinary

Control, was quoted telling The National newspaper. *"We cannot keep people here who create disorder. Their presence in the country is dangerous and therefore we need to take action against them."* (1)

In partnership with Korea's Samsung Corp. and Belgian builder Besix, Arabtec built the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Completed in 2010, the steel and glass spire rises 828 metres above downtown Dubai and houses the Armani hotel, where rooms start at \$650-a-night.

In both the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, migrants make up the overwhelming majority of the population.

According to the government figures, just 825,000 of the 4.1 million people living in the UAE are citizens. Dubai's migrant population dipped when the country was rocked by the financial crash of 2009, which froze \$582 billion worth of infrastructure projects and led to thousands of migrants being thrown out of work. Across the UAE, however, 70 percent of the population are migrants.

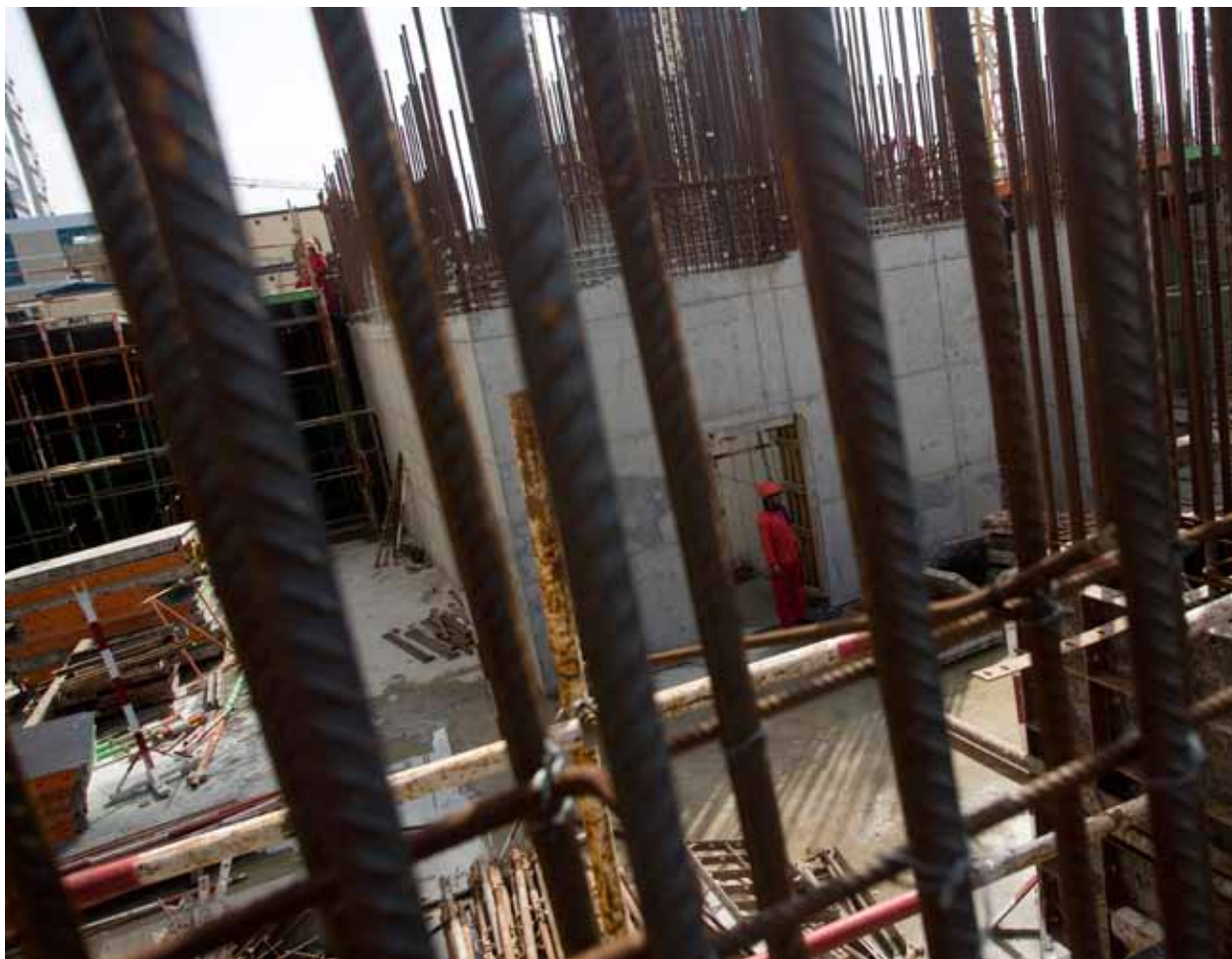
A census published in Qatar in October 2010 showed the population of the gas-rich state had more than doubled in six years to 1.69 million, but native Qataris number only around 200,000. In the labour market, the demographics are even more striking: just six percent of the workforce is Qatari.

Among the world's richest people, Qatari and Emirati citizens don't drive taxis, wait on tables or install plumbing. Their economies are dependent on the manual labour of migrant workers hailing mostly from south Asia, the Philippines or more recently East Africa.

Qatar can expect exponential growth in the migrant population during the run-up to the World Cup when infrastructure investments are expected to top \$100 billion. Some estimates suggest up to one million additional workers will be



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needed to build the 12 stadiums, 70,000 new hotel rooms and a network of road and rail links planned for the football extravaganza.

The Qatari government has announced plans to improve conditions for the migrant workers expected to flock in for the 2022 construction boom, including model housing complexes and tighter laws to prevent abuse. However, pressure will be on the world football body FIFA and the Western companies lining up for lucrative World Cup contracts to ensure that workers are provided with decent working, wage and housing conditions.

Qatar is the richest nation in the world with income per head of \$88,000 according to data last year from the International Monetary Fund. (2) A Nepalese construction worker is lucky to get \$3,600 year. A tearful Filipina domestic worker in Doha explained she was hoping to get an annual salary of \$2,500, often working 18 hours a day, before she ran away from her abusive employer.

The massive influx of labour into the Gulf has skewed the gender balance. Men outnumber women in Dubai by more than three to one. Migrants living and working in Qatar's Industrial Area can go for months without seeing a woman. The tens-of-thousands of men living in Sonapur can be seen spending their weekly Friday rest day with a mixture of prayer and cricket, but scattered piles of empty bottles of India-made whisky hidden show they have found other ways of easing the pain of separation from the loved ones.

They may not be visible, but there are tens of thousands of female migrants in the Gulf working as domestic servants in homes where they run the risk of verbal, physical or sexual abuse.

In 2010, over 1,000 distressed domestic workers sought shelter at a safe-house run by the Philippines Overseas Labour Office in Doha. Most fled their employers complaining of overwork or unpaid wage, but almost 300 reported physical abuse, and 75 said they had faced sexual abuse or harassment.

There is a similar situation in Dubai, where 161 women were seeking refuge at another POLO shelter in early February.

*"Most of them run away because they experience maltreatment from their employers,"* says Yuri Cipriano, a volunteer with the Filipino human rights organization Migrante Internationale. *"Most of them have been beaten or verbally abused. They don't have a day off and their salaries are not given to them."*

Faced with international criticism, the governments in both Qatar and the UAE have taken steps to improve conditions for migrant labour. Both have introduced legislation to grant workers more flexibility to change jobs, although they reject talk of scrapping the Kafala sponsorship system altogether.

Tighter rules have been brought in to control unscrupulous recruitment agencies, safety standards have been improved and workers have been granted extended statutory breaks from the blazing afternoon sun through three months of summer.

The UAE's Wages Protection System phased in since 2009 obliges companies to pay workers through electronic bank payments which can be monitored by the authorities. The move has been widely praised, but it has not stopped late payment of wages being the biggest complaint in the migrant hostels. The building of better housing for some has not prevented hundreds of thousands living in squalid conditions.

*"Lately there have been some new regulations which are very positive on the labour issue,"* says a Emirati human rights campaigner. *"On the other side, the number of labourers here in the UAE is huge and the resources of the Ministry of Labour are minute in comparison ... it's easy to put things on paper, but it's not easy to implement them."*

\*The names of several of the people interviewed in this report have been changed to protect their identity.

1 - 70 workers arrested in Dubai following unrest, The National, 27 January, 2011. www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/70-workers-arrested-in-dubai-following-unrest  
2 - World Economic Outlook Database, IMF, Oct. 2010. http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2010/02/weodata/weorept.aspx

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# Qatar's ambitions for the 2022 World Cup are pharaonic in scale



→P. Ames

**T**welve stadiums will be built or renovated and fitted with air-conditioning to allow for the searing summer heat. There will be dozens of giant new hotels, spanking new rail and subway networks, a whole new city with 200,000 residents and a \$20 billion upgrade for the road network.

It's estimated the tiny country will need to draft in up to a million new migrant workers to complete the task, with the construction boom due to move up a gear in 2012 as the World Cup preparations get into full swing.

*"There will be huge recruitment,"* says a Filipino diplomat dealing with labour issues in Doha. *"It's going to be a civil works tsunami".*

Infrastructure investments are expected to top \$100 billion, and international companies are lining up to compete for lucrative contracts.

Officials at the highest level of the Qatari government are anxious to avoid stories of the abuses currently endured by many migrant workers casting a shadow over the country's reputation in the run up to the World Cup.

The authorities have announced plans to improve conditions for the migrant workers, including model housing complexes and tighter laws to prevent abuse such as late salary payments or loan-sharking by recruitment agencies.

However, there is little sign that they are willing to reverse laws which effectively deny trade union, collective bargaining and strike rights to migrants.

There is widespread concern that migrants will fall victim to agencies seeking to make quick money from the World Cup recruitment boom or face exploitation from companies eager to cut costs and deadlines in the rush to complete projects in time for the tournament.

In the run up to the World Cup, pressure will mount on world football governing body FIFA, Qatari authorities and international companies to ensure that workers are provided with decent working, wage and housing conditions.

*"Conditions for migrant workers in the Middle East are unacceptable,"* says Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.

*"The World Cup is a time when the eyes of the world will be on Qatar and the other nations in this region. We will do everything to see that FIFA lives up to its responsibilities, that multinationals providing goods for the World Cup and their supply chains are actually respectful of workers rights."*

Poor nations who supply the bulk of workers in the Gulf region are already looking forward to a World Cup windfall in remittances sent home by migrants.

*"They will require a huge number of foreign workers to construct the stadiums and build other infrastructure related to the showpiece soccer event. We are hopeful Qatar will recruit the bulk of the foreign workers from Bangladesh,"* Mohammed Abul Basher, president of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, told Dhaka's The Financial Express newspaper in March. (1)

*"Labour demand up in Qatar amid World Cup construction,"* The Kathmandu Post reported in February.

It quoted figures from Nepal's Department of Foreign Employment showing Qatar had replaced Malaysia as the number one destination for Nepalese workers, with 11,000 leaving for the Gulf nation in January. (2)

Qatar already has world-class sports facilities. The Doha Sports City in the capital contains the 50,000-seat Khalifa





stadium, an Olympic-sized swimming centre and the Aspire Dome, one of the world's largest indoor sports arenas. The zone played host to the 2006 Asian Games and the final of the 2011 Asian Cup in January.

Dozens of migrants in blue overalls were working on the stadium in the days after the Asian Cup final: Nepalese peeling up rolls of artificial turf or removing fencing; Ghanaians fixing security barriers; Indians working on renovation of the 300 meter high Aspire Tower which looms over the sports centre.

However, the current work will pale into insignificance compared with the major overhaul planned for the stadium ahead of 2022.

A number of major international companies are already

involved in projects ahead of the World Cup. German architects Albert Speer and Partner played a key role in drawing up plans for some of the Qatari stadiums and is hoping to win contracts to build them; Deutsche Bahn is working on the creation of Doha's new metro and railway network, which will include high-speed train links to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; Qatar Holding paid almost \$530 million for a 9.1 percent stake in Germany's largest builder Hochtief in December as part of the country's 2022 preparations.

*"This transaction cements our relationship with one of the key trading partners for the development of the infrastructure of Qatar ahead of the World Cup in 2022," Ahmad Mohamed al Sayed, managing director of Qatar Holding, said at the time. (3)*

The international organizations were short on detail when asked about how they plan to ensure a decent deal for

### Raju is a Nepalese businessman in Qatar. He also works for the local branch of an organization that promotes the interests of Nepalese migrants around the world

*"In the Middle East there are many prospects, but problems too, especially non-payment and underpayment of salaries. We estimate there are 350,000 Nepali in Qatar. Across the Middle East there are 1.3 million Nepali.*

*"Officially there are very few females because the government says 'no,' but there are a few who get around the rules by going through India. The government is about to allow them to go again because they think that will make it easier to control it.*

*"Most of the men are in construction and services. Recruitment is a problem. We cannot always believe the recruitment agencies. The government has to monitor and punish them. They are working hand in hand to cheat the people, with these double contracts, with the fees they are charging. Sometimes, the workers need two years to recover the money they pay them, which is not acceptable.*

*"Many Nepalis are happy here, but there are some companies that are not treating the workers as human beings. These workers are the people who are building the country. For the World Cup we are expecting a boom in infrastructure development bringing in many more workers. We are expecting better pay and conditions for the workers. The labour law is good, but it has to be properly applied. If they implement the legal system it's OK. We cannot expect everything to change overnight, but they have to care about these people who are going to have a life in this country.*

*"Part of the problem is that the payment system is very bad. It takes 60 or 90 days to get payments after you invoice, so investors have problems too. Sometimes we don't get payments, so it's a vicious circle. Some companies are good, but they can't pay their workers. Sometimes, I can't pay my workers on time even if I wish to."*

→ Eduardo Diaz



workers on the World Cup projects.

*"FIFA will work hand in hand with the Qatari Local Organising Committee (LOC) in the coming years to address opportunities to increase the positive and reduce the negative impacts of the FIFA World Cup,"* the world football body said in response to a query on its commitment to workers rights. *"It is important to note, however, that the responsibility for the construction of stadia remains with the host country under the supervision of the LOC and that, in this regard, the national laws must be respected."*

In a statement, Hochtief pointed to its good safety record in Qatar and stressed its long commitment to International Labour Organization standards. It is unclear, however, how such standards, which include the freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, are applied in Qatar where the labour law effectively denies such rights to migrant workers.

*"We can look back on 24 million manhours without 'Lost Time Accident' (and) more than 200,000 manhours spent on health and safety training. Furthermore we have installed site clinics that have, as noted by Qatar authorities, the highest standard in Qatar,"* said Bernd Pütter, Hochtief's head of communications. *"As you can see, we care about our employees in Qatar and the rest of the world."*

The architects Albert Speer and Partners said they were not authorized to discuss workers rights and referred questions to the Qatari World Cup organizing committee. Deutsche Bahn did not reply to repeated questions in time for the deadline for this report.

1 – The Financial Express, 18 March, 2011 ([www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news\\_id=129633&date=2011-03-18](http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news_id=129633&date=2011-03-18))  
 2 – The Kathmandu Post, 22 February 2011 ([www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/02/22/money/labour-demand-up-in-qatar-amid-world-cup-construction/218730.html](http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/02/22/money/labour-demand-up-in-qatar-amid-world-cup-construction/218730.html))  
 3 – The National, 7 December 2010 ([www.thenational.ae/business/economy/hochtief-deal-kicks-off-qatar-cup-preparations](http://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/hochtief-deal-kicks-off-qatar-cup-preparations))



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**Pradeep from Nepal works for a transport company which employs migrants as drivers for trucks, earthmovers and other vehicles used by Doha's construction sector**

*"Today we got our salary, 1,200 riyals (\$330). I'm a rich guy. I can offer you anything. They hold on to the salary of November, they always hold on to one month's salary to make sure people don't run away. I will not come back to this company, never. I was planning to go after one year, but they will not allow me to go back after only one year."*

*"The managers are Palestinian, there are three of them. They are always shouting, telling me I am careless, blaming me for their own mistakes, threatening to hit me."*

*"Previously they used to hit also, but they don't do that*

*anymore because one guy hit back. He beat one of them up pretty bad. So this one told the others, 'don't try to push these Nepalese guys around, they may be small, but they are really bad.' So they still threaten, but they don't dare use their hands any more. The Nepalese guy got sent home, they gave him cancellation papers, said he was a bad worker. They didn't say he'd hit them because they were afraid they would get in trouble for starting it. Maybe that's a good way to get home quick, but it's not a good idea, because you never know what might happen in court."*

## Amid Gulf riches migrants forced to Live in squalid slums



→ Matilde Gattoni

**A** thumb-sized white candle in the palm of a Nepalese transport worker's hand throws out a pale circle of light to reveal his bleak surroundings.

Contained within bare concrete walls, a blackened gas ring and a couple of wooden boxes covered with grease-stained newspaper serve as a kitchen for the two dozen South Asian migrants who share this grim two-story block choked with dust from the neighbouring cement plant in Doha's sprawling Industrial Area.

There's a grimy sink, but no running water and no electricity.

In a soft, patient voice Pradeep explains that his employers usually only turn on the generator and the water supply for three or four hours a day.

*"We are suffering,"* interjects Ragiva, his Sri Lankan neighbour. *"We are human beings. How can they make us live like this?"*

In some ways, they are lucky. For reasons that have not been explained to them, the company recently moved most of its drivers elsewhere, so those who remain have the luxury of a room to themselves.

A few blocks away, 35 Sri Lankan welders live packed four to each tiny room in a single-story lean-to built along the back wall of the vehicle repair shop where they work with no air-conditioning and no eye-protection for 12 hours a day.

There's one fetid bathroom, but the men have stopped cooking in the kitchen next door since so many fell sick. Instead they have to buy food from a café at the nearby market. Here at least they have electricity, so a sound system booms out Indian pop as the men spend their evening resting, washing clothes or working out with some home-made dumbbells.

The Industrial Area lies about 10 kilometres from the centre



of Doha, but it feels a world away from the city's breezy, palm-lined seafront or the gondolas carrying shoppers around the surreal, Venetian-themed Villaggio shopping mall.

Giovanni Espinal, an American university professor who runs education classes for migrants, says over 200,000 low-income workers live among the sprawling tangle of hostels, factories, warehouses and vehicle repair shops of the Industrial Area. The suburb is huge, covering an area roughly the size of 1,500 football pitches, but is kept hidden well away from Doha's wealthy inhabitants.

*"When people have some problems with their cars, then they realise that this area exists," Espinal explains. "They can be in Doha for years and then they have to bring their cars here for maintenance and they look around and think: 'this is Doha?' Well, yes it is."*

Dubai's version of the Industrial Areas houses over 150,000 migrant labourers in a township known as Sonapur. It lies between a waste dump and a cemetery, and the name is ironic: it means "city of gold" in Hindi.

The place is made up of what the inhabitants call "labour camps," street upon street of cheaply made, company-run accommodation units that resemble prison blocks or military barracks. The Dubai authorities have made an effort to clear up Sonapur after a damning 2006 Human Rights Watch report triggered a wave of negative press(1). Some of the worst camps were closed down, roads were paved and sewage no longer runs in the streets. Sonapur, however, remains a dismal place to live.

Compounds owned by some of the larger corporations are surrounded by walls and tight security to prevent unauthorized visitors. Others are more open. On his Friday off, Egyptian construction worker Tarik was happy to show visitors around the three-story block he shares with 156 other

migrants. They live packed six-to-a-room around a central courtyard that's draped with a colourful array of sarongs and soccer shirts hung out to dry.

In Tarik's room the three narrow bunk beds take up pretty much all the space. There's a portable television next to the door, and the workers' few personal belongings are kept in plastic bags nailed to the wall. There is no private space. The cacophony of Arab and Indian music blaring from the rooms and the blend of aromas wafting from the communal kitchen reflects the mix of nationalities – Indians, Egyptians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Syrians – living in this restricted space.

*"There is no problem having labourers from so many cultures here," says Rama, a building worker from the southern Indian state of Kerala who has lived in Dubai since 2004. "We are all friends and we cooperate together."*

In one complex made up of 80 rooms in four back-to-back, single-story huts, visitors are greeted by an evil-smell from the broken toilets in the latrine block. The more fortunate inhabitants have beds, while others sleep on mats or stained mattresses on the cement floors. There are six or more men living in each of the 3 x 3 meter rooms with the only natural light filtering through yellowing newspapers covering the small windows. Workers living there have put up a sign saying "Welcome all People."

Given the harsh conditions, the migrants make remarkable efforts to bring a sense of normality to their lives on the one day a week they get off work. Muslim workers flock out of their squalid dormitories in immaculate white shirts and colourful lungi cloths for Friday prayers. Others browse Sonapur's little shops in anticipation of the long-awaited trip back to their loved-ones – plastic dinosaurs and Hannah Montana rucksacks are among the more popular gifts. ●●●

## University professor Giovanni Espinal spends much of his spare time running an education programme for migrant workers living in Doha's run-down Industrial Area

*"We teach on Qatari law: what happens if they get arrested, how to contact embassies. On the second Friday, we teach about health, hydration, how not to spread diseases. They live in a room with ten people, so if one person gets sick, everybody gets sick.*

*"The third one is about jobs, their rights, who to contact when they have problems. We sometimes get somebody from the National Human Rights Committee to spend some time with them. The last one is shopping, how not to get ripped off, how to travel.*

*"We've had around 300 students. I was inspired to do this when I saw guys at the airport; they did not understand the signs in English and Arabic, and they lost these bottles of creams and lotions which they'd bought to take back to their families and which must have been very expensive for them. Nobody had taught them to pack.*

*"Eighty percent are Nepalese. We also have Egyptians, Sri Lankans, a few Filipinos.*

*"The authorities have made improvements. Workers don't have it as bad as maybe three or four years ago, but the salary thing hasn't been settled. They don't know if they*

*are going to get paid on time. I tell you, they can build them beautiful quarters, we can have the best social departments, the best services, but if they don't get their salaries on time, who cares? They come here to work.*

*"It is horrible. I cannot imagine, every end of the month thinking 'am I going to get paid or not?' And they are only waiting for 800 riyals (\$220). That causes tons of stress for them, and that's got to be changed. Once that changes, I think that the quality of life will change a lot.*

*"Contract substitution is a big problem. The guy is in Nepal, and he signs a paper that says 2,000 riyals (\$550), and the paper says free food and everything. He comes here, and they deduct the price of the food and accommodation, so he gets 1,200 riyals (\$330). They sign the contract in Nepal, and then they come here and they sign something different in Arabic.*

*"There are psychological pressures. They can be here six months without leaving the Industrial Area, so they won't even see a woman. Loneliness is a big problem, but they are very good at finding people from their villages and building these micro communities."*



dreds of South Asians head to a patch of sandy wasteland to join in a baffling series of overlapping cricket matches.

However, behind a mound of earth on the edge of the makeshift sports field, there is evidence of the strain the men are under: a pile of dozens of discarded bottles of Indian liquor that is widely available in Sonapur despite Dubai's restrictions on alcohol sales.

*"This is the best thing we have,"* says Filipino truck driver Joey pointing to his bottle of McDowell's No. 1 whiskey. *"Apart from this all we can do is work and eat and sleep. If we are not working we are sleeping until we get up for work again tomorrow."*

He puts up it with because he has to send money back to his wife and four children back home. *"In the Philippines there is no more work and we can't afford to live,"* he says. For Joey and for so many of the other migrants, the main problem is not the dismal housing, but his employer's refusal to pay promised wages.

*"He gives us a living allowance, but not our full salary. That's tough on my family. We can't pay for their studies. It's a big problem. My mother is growing vegetables in the garden and is selling them in the market. That's all she can do to support them,"* he explains, taking another sip of the Bangalore-made whiskey.

In Qatar, where alcohol rules are stricter and whiskey harder to come by, desperate workers concoct hazardous mixtures of orange or mango juice with cleaning fluids and after-shave. Fights and illness are common.

There is some relatively good lodging. Migrants complain that smaller companies often provide the most degraded accommodation while bigger firms with international ties seek to protect their reputations by improving conditions. Close to the bustling Al Attiya market, which is the centre of social life in Doha's Industrial Area, a Nepalese worker making tea in his tidy, white-washed room says he has no complaints about the housing provided by the Dubai-based ETA ASCON Star conglomerate.

Although it's still four to a room, there's ample closet space, and satellite TV is beamed in so the Nepalese residents can follow news and entertainment from Kathmandu. A four-man cleaning detail keeps the block in order. There's even space for the men to pamper pet rabbits in the shady yard out front. Migrants living here say wages are paid on time, and a notice pinned to the wall in the common space downstairs outlines details of the company's fund to provide medical insurance to its employees.

All this is a sign of progress. In his book *"Dubai: The Story of the World's Fastest City,"* American journalist Jim Krane describes a 2008 visit to an ETA ASCON camp in Sonapur. *"Fetid sewage boiled up from an overflowing septic tank and formed an algae-fringed pod in the camp courtyard. The black waters lapped at the very door steps of hundreds of residents, just inches from the shoes they'd left outside."* (2)

With the 2022 World Cup expected to bring in a massive influx of new workers and place Qatar under intense international media scrutiny, the authorities say there will be improvements to migrant housing. A new Labourers' City has been announced to house 53,000 workers at a cost of three billion Qatari Riyals (\$800 million). The project, located

→ Matilde Gattori





→ Matilde Gattoni

in the current Industrial Area, is designed to have cinemas, sports fields, mosques and landscaped gardens.

The Emir's influential wife Shiekha Moza bint Nasser is said to be taking a personal interest in proposals to build new-style housing complexes with a social department in each compound and on-site counsellors to provide psychological support and skills training, so they are better equipped for the job market when they return to their homeland.

Despite the high-level support, there are doubts about how such plans will be applied in practice. The Gulf states already have a plethora of rules that lay down strict housing guidelines. In Qatar, workers are supposed to have a minimum of four square metres space each. Buildings with more than 100 inhabitants should have a full-time nurse. There should be a toilet for every eight workers, and there are regulations on electricity supply, air-conditioning, cleaning and waste disposal. (3) It takes just a couple of hours visiting accommodation blocks in the Industrial Area to realise the extent to which the rules are flouted.

*"There are like five inspectors for the whole Industrial Area, so they go in every six months so they can't get to visit all the places,"* complains Espinal, the educator working with the migrants.

Even if the plans for improved accommodation are properly carried out, both Qatar and the UAE still want to keep the low-income migrants isolated in townships well apart from the more affluent local and professional expat populations. With foreigners outnumbering locals three to one, the au-

thorities are determined to keep the hundreds of thousands of poor *"bachelors"* from pouring into the posh shopping malls, picturesque souks or luxury waterfront developments.

Espinal tells how he once smuggled four Nepalese migrants past security guards to give them a glimpse of The Pearl, Doha's showcase, multibillion-dollar resort packed with luxury boutiques and glamorous restaurants on an artificial island that bills itself as the Arabian Riviera.

*"Guys are here for months without leaving the Industrial Area,"* he recalls. *"There they saw beautiful girls, fabulous stores. At least for one night they could dream about something different. Can you imagine for four months just seeing this every day?"*

Some migrants do get to live outside the labour camps. There are pockets of them in makeshift accommodation around Dubai. In a junk-strewn boatyard across the narrow Dubai Creek from the construction site of the opulent Palazzo Versace resort, 60 Bangladeshi welders and carpenters are squeezed into a jumble of flimsy prefabricated cubes surrounding the yachts and speedboats they work to repair.

Many labourers have found homes in Satwa, one of Dubai's most colourful and multicultural neighbourhoods, a commercial tangle that's filled with the neon-lit facades of Pakistani grocers, Indian electronic stores or Iranian restaurants. Satwa was due to be bulldozed to make way for another of Dubai's pharaonic luxury developments until the bursting of the emirate's property bubble in 2008 gave the district





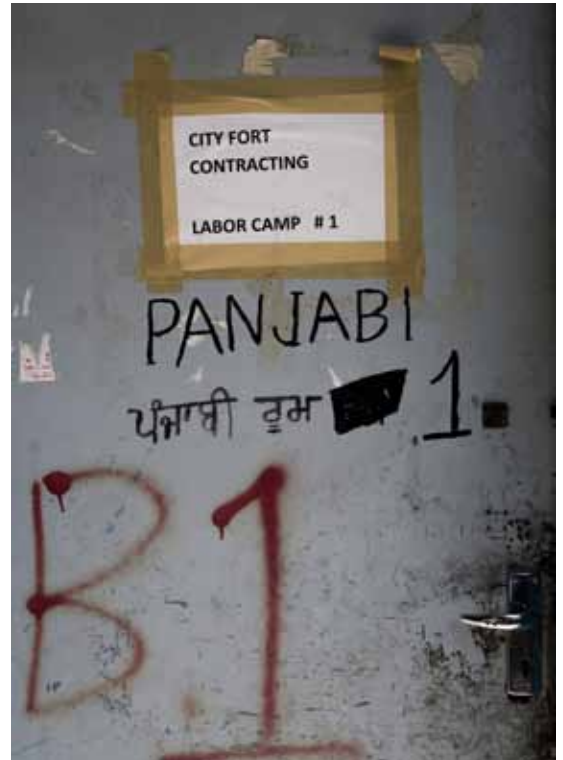
a reprieve. Migrant workers have moved into the villas left behind by middle-class families.

However, although the men here are more integrated into the fabric of the city, the unregulated nature of housing means conditions can be even worse than in the company dorms.

It's easy to find 60 men jammed ten to a room in a single house. In one, dozens of Bangladeshis mill around in a makeshift kitchen where the smell of stale sweat mingles with aromas of the watery curry cooked over on a variety of gas-powered hot plates. Piles of dusty blue overalls and threadbare bedding are scattered on a curling lino floor, while clean washing hangs down from overhead lines. The place is an obvious fire trap, and the scene is repeated countless times around the densely packed grid of residential streets between the shops of Al Satwa road and the futuristic architecture of Dubai Financial District.

Shahriar, a Bangladeshi driver says, the landlord rents each room for 2,500 UAE dirham (\$680 a month). Migrants spread the costs by cramming up to 12 people into the rooms. Even then, workers are falling into debt because, all too often, wages are paid late.

*"They don't get paid every month, the payment comes two or three months late," Shahriar says. "It makes it very difficult because we have to live here. We need to pay the rent for the home, for the food, and we are not getting the money that is promised. In Dubai now the companies are giving fraud to every worker. The problems are getting worse."*



→ Matilde Gattoni

1 - Building Towers, Cheating Workers, Human Rights Watch, 11 November, 2006. [www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/11/11/building-towers-cheating-workers](http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/11/11/building-towers-cheating-workers).  
2- Dubai, The Story of the World's Fastest City, Atlantic Books, p 201.  
3- Workers Rights Book, Hala Al Ali, National Human Rights Committee, Qatar

→ Matilde Gattoni



# Law offers little protection for abused domestic workers

**S**oraya is a cheerful, articulate young mother from Mindanao island in the southern Philippines. But her easy smile quickly gives way to tears as she recalls the abuse that forced her to run away from the house in Qatar where she'd hoped to earn some money to help her family trapped in poverty back home.

"From the first time I came to the house, she was always angry. She was always shouting at me," says Soraya from the safety of a shelter run by the Philippines Embassy.

"I am not really used to work like that, like a machine, because she was always staying 'do this, do that, and make it fast,' but I am not a machine. And then sometimes she will hit me ... if I have a mistake, she will hit me just like that."

After a year of working exhaustive hours, with no day off and subjected to constant verbal and occasional physical abuse, including having her hands shoved into a hot oven, 31-year-old Soraya fled in early February. The final straw came when her Libyan employer beat her with a stiletto-heeled shoe.

"She come back with her shoes, the pointed ones and she says if you don't want to stop your mouth, I will slap you and when I turned back she slapped me ... I was so scared that that she was going to come and kill me. I was thinking about that in a negative way. That is why I ran away here."

The suffering of domestic workers in the Middle East all too frequently hits headlines around the world: the Sri Lankan woman who accused her Saudi boss of hammering 24 nails into her body; the Emirati princesses charged in Belgium with sequestration, inhuman treatment and human trafficking for keeping 24 women locked away in their luxury hotel rooms; the Filipina maid who confessed she'd dumped her newborn son in an airliner's trash bin to cover the shame of her rape by a Qatari boss.

Behind such extreme cases, countless thousands of women face a daily grind of inhuman work hours. Some are subjected to relentless psychological pressure, beatings or sexual harassment. They are deprived of food and sleep, kept as virtual prisoners in their employers' homes and frequently go for months without receiving wages.

"They don't give them holidays, they keep working anytime they want them and they don't give them break hours. These poor guys would like to have their own lives. They cannot be working 24/7. They are not machines," says Emirati human rights campaigner "This is one of the biggest problems that the UAE is facing."

Government statistics in Dubai say there are 52,000 female domestic workers in the emirate, 34,000 of them earning less than 1,000 dirham (\$270) a month. Across the UAE, the Filipino human rights organization Migrante International estimates there are 80,000 Filipina domestic workers alone.

There were 48,000 foreign females in domestic service in Qatar, according to official data from 2009.

In both countries, domestic work is specifically excluded from the labour laws, so the maids have even less protection than migrant workers in construction or other sectors.

"If they are given days off, it's up to the discretion of their sponsor," says a Filipino diplomat who works closely on la-

bour issues. "There are good employers, but we have a lot of cases of mistreatment."

The treatment meted out to some household workers appears to be little better than slavery, which was only abolished in Dubai and Qatar in the mid-20th century.

However, it is not only locals who mistreat maids: many household workers, like Soraya, say their abuse was at the hands of expat bosses. Under Dubai law, any married head of household earning at least 6,000 dirham a month (\$1,600) can sponsor a maid to enter the country. Many mid-income expats do so only to find they cannot afford to pay their wages.

In some cases the pressure on the women gets too much. Suicide attempts are disturbingly common. In February, a Bangladeshi maid aged just 17 plunged to her death from a 16th story apartment in Dubai's plush Jumeirah Lake Towers area after warning her Indian employers that she would take her own life; three weeks later an 23-year-old Indonesian was hospitalized after taking an overdose in the neighbouring emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. The most recent data from the Dubai police reveals there were 113 suicides in 2009, and housemaids and construction workers made up most of the victims.

Nepal banned its women from domestic work in the Gulf after a maid committed suicide in Kuwait in 1998, but the government reversed the decision in December saying employers will have to provide guarantees of security, work conditions and a decent wage.

The Philippines authorities have taken action to improve conditions for overseas domestic workers, raising the age that they can leave the country from 18 to 25, setting a minimum wage of \$400 a month, imposing mandatory orientation classes on departing workers and banning recruitment agencies from demanding placement fees from the migrants.

Filipino diplomats, however, admit that the rules are frequently flouted. Women desperate to escape from poverty at home collaborate with recruitment agents to get around the restrictions in order to pursue their dream of Gulf riches. Recruitment agencies can also look elsewhere. Indonesia, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka are among nations becoming increasingly popular hunting grounds for Middle Eastern employers. Indonesia and Bangladesh require a minimum wage of around just \$200 for their maids in the UAE.

Safe houses set up by Philippines embassies for runaway housemaids are packed. The one in Dubai held over 150 women in the first week of February, while a smaller unit attached to the Philippines Labour Office in Doha had around



→ Reuters

**Estrela, 39, is a Filipina maid. She arrived in February 2010 to work for a Qatari family, but fled in December after an assault by her female employer. She found shelter in a safe-house run by the Philippines Embassy in Doha**



→ Eduardo Diaz

*"I decided to work in Qatar to support my family's needs, especially food shelter and education. I have three children. My husband is working in the Philippines, but it's better that we are both working because we can't meet all the needs because it's very expensive right now in the Philippines.*

*"I'm surprised at the way they treated me there. I just tried my best to fulfil my responsibilities as a servant. The problem came on December 17 when my madam hit on my forehead with a plate.*

*"She told me she wanted mushroom soup. When I served her, she said not that tray, a bigger one. So I transfer the food to the larger tray and I take it to her and she say it has to be bigger. So I take the biggest tray, but there is not enough space to put that on the table, so she got angry and threw the food on the floor and called me all the bad words, the Arabic words.*

*"After that when I bend down to pick up the tray, she threw the plate and it hit me on the forehead, so the blood was coming out like a faucet.*

*"I ask myself, 'what kind of madam is this?' It was not the first time. Before she hit me on the arms, it left marks, but I thought maybe it's just this one time.*

*"Everyday she was shouting, but I'm thinking maybe I'll finish my contract, two years, even though it's traumatic, morning until night, shouting like this. My employer, the man he is really good but he does not know what happens inside the house, because he has a business and is often in another country.*

*"My day was like this. I wake up at four o'clock, because I want one hour for myself. Then at five o'clock I'm starting and I finish at 12 midnight. I really missed sleep. We don't have day off. There was no rest, only working, working, working. To eat, you have just a minute only. All the time they are calling by buzzer up and down, up and down.*

*"Every time when I want my salary, if I want to send money for the family, she controlled it and I cannot handle my salary. When I say I want all my salary, she says 'no' and only sends the money she wants to send. I was supposed to get \$200 dollar, but they were not giving it."*



30, including Soraya.

Data compiled by the Labour Office over the course of 2010 shows that 1,270 distressed household workers sought its assistance. Most were for overwork, lack of food or unpaid salaries, but there were 291 cases alleging physical abuse, 59 involving sexual abuse or harassment, and 16 of rape or attempted rape. A category marked "others" comprising 136 cases includes housemaids who fled after being accused of sorcery by their employers, or "love-related cases" which includes women facing allegations of having affairs out of marriage – an offence in Qatar.

Unless they get a release paper from their former employers, foreign workers cannot look for a new job in their host country and face deportation. Even then, the women often have to wait several weeks before they can leave the country

while they secure exit visas and retrieve passports, which are often held illegally by their employers.

Filipino diplomats say local authorities are speeding up clearance procedures for those waiting to leave, but employers insist that restrictions on the women's movements are needed to prevent "absconding" maids from working for others after the sponsors have invested in their travel to the Gulf and other administrative costs.

The runaways use their time waiting to leave trying to claw back unpaid wages from their employers, but they are rarely willing or able to go through the lengthy procedures needed to reclaim their money through the courts.

Soraya says she was paid her salary of 800 Qatari riyals (\$200) for just four of the 12 months she worked for her abusive employer. Going back home without that money

would place an intolerable burden on the family she left to provide for.

"I decided to work in Qatar because I am a single mum and my family, they need support from me," she explains through sobs. "My mum, she is only a worker in a market. We have only a very little store for selling vegetables. My father is sick and he cannot work everyday, so only me and my mum work for the food and for my children also. We are six brothers and sisters and also my children. I need to give financial

support for them while they grow up."

She was hoping against hope that her employer's husband, who had always treated her well, would pay the eight-month back-wages or sign release papers so she could try her luck with another family in Qatar.

"It's not a mistake to come here in Qatar, because there are also many Filipinas here working nicely, so maybe I'm not the lucky one."

## Nhel Morona once faced bullets marching for people power in the Philippines. In Dubai for 15 years, he runs the local branch of Migrant International, which strives to protect the rights of Filipinos working around the world

"Here in the UAE we estimate there are around 500,000 Filipinos. Most of the problems we deal with involve women domestic workers. Just yesterday we were helping get a ticket home for one of the victims, a domestic servant who was maltreated, abused and not given her salary. These are common problems.

"We came from the Philippines Labour Office because we gave them the death certificate of one of our fellow Philippines migrants. She died because of a heart attack, and the reason behind that is because she was a runaway for a long time and she had a part-time job. That is illegal under Dubai law, and she was worrying about that all the time.

"She was just 27 years old. She had run away (from her official job) because she was mistreated, abused physically and verbally, beaten by the wife and the husband. Also, she was not given her salary and was made to work excess time. Her name was Jenny Rose, she was from Mindanao, and died on January 16th.

"Another problem here is that when you die, it will take at least a month before you are repatriated. We are hoping to send her home on February 12, but the last death we handled, in Ras al-Khaimah in the northern part of the UAE, was stuck in the morgue for almost four months.

"The most common problem is contract substitution. They

sign a contract in the Philippines and then after they get here, the employer gives them another contract that will be registered in the Ministry of Labour, and in that contract they will change the remuneration, the benefits, the time off. The maximum working time for the service sector is nine hours only, but 99 percent of domestic workers are working 12 hours in a day with the same salary.

"It is the burden of the employer to cover the expenses of workers coming here, but when the Filipinos come here, the expenses incurred by the employer are deducted from their salaries.

"There was one who jumped from a building to run away. She is in the hospital. Then the employer came and made a complaint against her that she stole something, and the police immediately believe the employer without digging into the reason why this migrant jumped from the building. They put weight on the argument of the employer, not the migrant. That is very common here.

"In cases of rape and sexual abuses, if they go to the legal system, they twist their story, and then the perpetrator sometimes says that she is his girlfriend and they have a relationship. And here if you have a relationship outside marriage, it's illegal, so the tendency is that the lady will get jail. There are lots of stories, sometimes they get pregnant by the man of the house."

## New ITUC **Video** documentary



(Reportage: Paul Ames, Cinematography: Eduardo Diaz)

Weblink to the short version (3'), in

**English:** <http://www.ituc-csi.org/hidden-faces-of-the-gulf-miracle,9131.html>

**Arabic:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e\\_iSpJLfcFw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_iSpJLfcFw)

**French:** <http://www.ituc-csi.org/golfe-la-face-honteuse-du-miracle.html>

**Spanish:** <http://www.ituc-csi.org/el-precio-oculto-del-milagro-del.html>

**Weblink to the long version (10'), in English:** <http://www.ituc-csi.org/hidden-faces-of-the-gulf-miracle.html>

# Sponsorship system keeps workers workers tied to abusive employers

**M**igrants heading for work in Qatar or the United Arab Emirates are hired under a system known as kafala.

That means that they must be sponsored by a local company for whom they will work for the duration of their stay in their host country. The system effectively traps them in their job for the length of their contract. Only in exceptional circumstances can they switch to another employer while there.

Obstacles are also created to prevent them from leaving the country if they are unhappy with their work or living conditions. The employers who sponsored their arrival will often hold on to their workers' passports or refuse to provide the authorisation needed for them to get an exit visa.

The authorities say such rules are needed to protect the investments of employers who have incurred costs in bringing the workers into the country.

They add that restrictions are needed to control the movements of migrants due to the demographic situation in countries where foreign workers far outnumber the indigenous population. Emiratis make up just two percent of the UAE's private sector workforce. In Qatar, 85 percent of the workforce is made up of foreigners who depend on their employer for residency rights.

However, the sponsorship system has earned widespread international condemnation as an infringement of the workers' basic rights that frequently exposes migrants to further abuse.

"The 'free visa' or kafala (sponsorship) system causes distortions to the market and can lead to forced labour and trafficking," the International Labour Organization said in a regional report released in January, 2011. (1)

"Provisions of the sponsorship law create conditions that can lead to forced labour activities and slave-like conditions," the US State Department declared in its 2009 Human Rights Report on Qatar. (2)

In the face of such international criticism, some Gulf nations have taken steps to end the kafala system. Bahrain decided in 2009 to scrap it, drawing criticism from some of its neighbours.

Nevertheless, Qatar's prime minister said in November the country might consider abolishing the kafala, and Kuwait is looking at replacing the sponsorship system.

The UAE this year introduced changes to its sponsorship system that allows unskilled workers who have completed a two-year contract to change jobs without the need for a No-Objection Certificate from their previous employer. However, they will still need authorization from the Labour Ministry. Skilled workers and professionals do not need to wait the two years. The previous system meant that workers had to leave the country for at least six months if their employer refused to allow them to switch jobs after two years.

"Employees cannot just leave whenever they want to, they still need to respect their contracts," Humaid al Suwaidi, undersecretary at the UAE Labour Ministry told Abu Dhabi-based newspaper *The National* in January. "But if there was a breach of contract or employees are not getting their wages, meaning that the employer has committed a viola-



→ Matilde Gattori

tion, the ministry needs to be informed and interfere to end the contract between them." (3)

In 2009, Qatar said the government could temporarily authorize migrants to work in another job if they were in a dispute with their sponsor.

Even when laws are changed to benefit the workers, there are often shortfalls in their implementation, and migrants are frequently unaware of their rights. Local media reports in March quoted a survey of Asia migrants in Qatar which found 88 percent said they had to relinquish their passports to employers, despite changes to the law in 2009 which made it illegal for them to do so beyond the completion of residence formalities. (4)

In 2010, the UAE introduced a Wages Protection Scheme which stipulated that companies had to pay migrant workers electronically through bank payments that could be monitored by the Labour Ministry.

Companies that fail to comply can face fines or be denied labour cards that allow them to hire new staff. The move has been praised by rights campaigners, but workers, particularly those working for smaller companies, continue to complain that they often go months without payment.

"The Wages Protection System is one important development which reduces the number of unpaid employees and gives the Ministry of Labour the ability to monitor the companies'



performance in terms of paying wages,” says an Emirate human rights campaigner. “On the other side the number of labourers here in the UAE is huge and the resources of the Ministry of Labour are minute in comparison. It’s about 4.1 million (migrants) that are registered, so they will not be able to control the situation to the point where it should be, but they are trying to overcome this.”

An Emirate human rights campaigner also praised recent rules that expand the afternoon breaks for construction workers from two to three hours during the three hottest months of the searing Gulf summer.

Qatari labour law lies down strict rules on workers accommodation, stipulating that workers should have at least 4 square metres each in shared rooms, a first aid room staffed by a qualified nurse for every 100 men, toilets for every eight workers, regular cleaning of accommodation, etc. And there are rules limiting working hours, stipulating vacation time and days off. But rules are frequently ignored.

On paper, the workers can go to the courts to seek redress when employers violate the regulations. In reality the process is long, complicated and often leaves workers stranded without wages while they wait for a judgement.

The National reported in March that 400 workers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh living in the Al Faya labour camp in the desert east of Abu Dhabi have gone up to ten months without salaries. They complain that it took months before the courts would take up their case. Some gave up and returned home without the unpaid wages; others fear to do so because their visas have expired and they face a fine of up to 10,000 dirham (\$2,700) at the airport. (5)

Beyond the courts, migrants have little scope for action. Trade unions are effectively prohibited, collective bargaining severely restricted and strikes and demonstrations have been put down with severity, with leaders arrested or deported.

Qatari law allows the formation of “workers committees” in companies with a Qatari workforce of more than 100, but foreigners are not allowed to join. Strikes are in theory allowed, but only with the permission of the Ministry of Labour and after two weeks notice. They are banned in the gas and petroleum industries and areas such as power, water and transport.

In the UAE strikes by public sector workers are banned and although not specifically prohibited in the private sector, the law allows employers to suspend strikers, and workers who have been absent from work without a valid reason can be deported.

For domestic workers the situation can be even worse. They are specifically excluded from the labour laws and are not offered even the limited protection from the Ministry of Labour. Instead they are largely at the mercy of the employers

whose homes they share.

### Problems for the workers often begin in their homelands

Recruitment agencies often demand illegal fees from migrants that force them into debt. The survey of Asian workers in Qatar show half had paid recruiting agencies fees before leaving home. The average fee was 2,000 riyals (\$550). Some paid much more and have gone deep into debt in order to pay.

The agencies also cheat workers by offering contracts in their own language before they leave, which are not valid in the Gulf country and are substituted by contracts that provide for lower wages.

Authorities in Qatar and the UAE are discussing options for developing links with sending countries to clamp down on contract substitution and other abuses by recruiting agencies. In some labour supply countries, a local trade union or the authorities do endeavour to educate workers on their rights and the pitfalls they may encounter in the Gulf before they leave. But many workers fall through the net.

Some efforts have also been made to increase workers’ awareness of their rights in the destination countries. In Qatar, the National Human Rights Committee last year set up a labour rights unit, which is getting up to 15 cases a day – mostly on late salaries.

The NHRC has also produced a booklet on workers’ rights in seven languages that has been distributed to workers and has helped to train trainers among the workforce to help explain their rights under Qatari labour law.

“One Filipino guy came up to me and said ‘I’m here for 12 years and it’s the first time I hear that I have some rights and had them explained to me in my own language’,” said a campaigner working with the committee.

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3 UAE leads on path to workers sponsorship reform, The National, 11 January, 2011 [www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/uae-leads-on-path-to-worker-sponsorship-reform?pageCount=0](http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/uae-leads-on-path-to-worker-sponsorship-reform?pageCount=0)

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→ Matilde Gattoni



# Migrants build Gulf mega-Projects; despite improvements safety remains a concern



→ Matilde Gattoni

**Y**ou have to get up high to comprehend the scale of the building work underway in Doha.

The panoramic view from the 40-story Alfardan Towers shows a forest of high-rise towers growing up alongside the still waters of Doha bay.

Just below, a fleet of white and orange buses awaits the hundreds of men in blue overalls clambering over the scaffolding of the Doha Convention Centre and Tower, a \$1.5 billion development that will include a 105-story skyscraper and 100,000 square-meters of shopping and exhibition space.

More mega-projects lay beyond: there's Sports City with its 50,000-seat stadium and the world's biggest indoor sports hall; Education City which has eight university campuses; The Pearl resort for the super-rich comprised of 13 artificial islands and 32 kilometres of new coastline; the new Lusail city designed to provide homes for 250,000 people. All this is before they even start of the \$100 billion worth of developments linked to the 2022 World Cup.

Hundreds of thousands of construction workers have been drafted in to build these mammoth projects. Most are from India, Nepal and other South Asia nations, although the mix includes many other nationalities from Africa, poorer Arab nations or elsewhere in Asia.

Building workers make up the bulk of the migrant labour in the Gulf, and their work is dangerous and difficult, particularly during the scorching summer months. All too frequently they fall victim to dishonest recruitment practices leaving them cheated of wages or forced into debt to pay off illegal fees.

Qatar had 504,684 foreign construction workers according to the 2010 census. That's more than seven times the total number of economically active Qatari citizens. Just 621 Qataris worked in construction, and 293 of them were employers.

## The construction boom is repeated along the Gulf coast

City planners in Abu Dhabi are planning for the population to soar to up to five million by 2030 – it's currently 900,000, but was just 127,000 in 1975.

The city currently has 16 skyscrapers over 200 metre planned or under construction. Ten-thousand construction workers from 18 nationalities are building the Saadiyat Island development which will house 145,000 residents as well as major outposts of the Guggenheim and Louvre museums, a state-of-the-art performing arts centre, lavish hotels and leisure facilities.

The world's top architects including Lord Norman Foster, Franck Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Jean Nouvel were drafted in to design the buildings. Gary Player did the golf course.

Conditions for labourers on the island were denounced by a Human Rights Watch report in 2009 (1). Sensitive to international criticism of a project which is designed to attract foreign tourists, the authorities responded by building Construction Village, which they claim is a model for worker accommodation complete with sports facilities, libraries and computer banks.

However, they faced fresh complaints in March 2011, when the New York Times reported that over 130 artists, including

many from the Middle East, had threatened to boycott the new Guggenheim unless conditions for foreign labourers are improved. In particular, the artists want employers to reimburse recruitment fees paid by the workers. (2)

Official statistics from 2005 showed the UAE had 718,000 construction workers.

Dubai kicked off the region's turbo-charged building boom. In 2006, it was estimated that 30,000 cranes were in use in Dubai, almost a quarter of the world's total.

The emirate still sets the standards for grandiose projects from the Burj Khalifa downwards to its mega-malls, desert ski resort and luxury island developments, despite the crash of 2008-9, which slammed the breaks on the emirate's upwards and outward expansion.

In early 2009, Dubai's Ministry of Labour was reported to be cancelling up to 2,000 work permits a day for migrant workers. The International Organization for Migration estimated construction projects worth \$583 billion were frozen and around 20 percent of short-term contract workers lost their jobs.

These days, a drive around Dubai's huge Business Bay development is a rather eerie experience. This city-within-the-city is eventually supposed to house 300,000 people in a new residential and business centre around an artificial extension of Dubai Creek, but work has ground to a standstill on many of the project's 160 towers.

South Asian men labouring in those sites where work is still ongoing say they were forced to accept wage cuts or suffer from late salary payments, which have worsened since the crisis.

"We've got 450 workers here on two shifts, but it's very bad for them. Some of the workers are only getting 600 dirham (\$165) a month," says a safety officer on one Business Bay development.

Disturbingly he says the bursting of the Dubai's property bubble is also having an impact on site safety. "The company is cutting corners, it's because of the recession," he whispers outside of earshot of his colleagues.

In 2008, Dubai had 6,000 building sites and just 16 inspectors, according to Dubai: The Story of the World's Fastest City, a book by American journalist Jim Krane. His source was Graeme McCraig, who headed BuildSafe UAE, a group set up within the construction industry to promote safety on building sites. (3)

In an investigation, the Dubai-based Construction Week magazine found that 880 construction workers died in accidents in 2004. (4) Krane cites an anonymous construction safety trainer who says the figure was around 800 in 2007.

Since then there have been improvements. "There is always room for improvement in all countries, even the advanced countries, but health and safety in the Middle East has made a lot of progress," said Dave

Bass, a freelance occupational health and safety consultant working with BuildSafe UAE in Dubai. "I've been here for 20 years in the Middle East and I've seen a lot of positive change." There are also widespread reports of construction workers suffering serious health problems caused by heat and dehydration while working in summer temperatures that can rise over 50 C.

In Qatar, where there are 350,000 Nepalese workers, over 100 die every year from heart problems, many of them apparently healthy young men. Many of the fatalities occur within days of their starting work in the heat of the Gulf.

"The Northern and Middle regions of Nepal are mountainous with cool weather. The sudden relocation of workers to harsh weather is pointed out by health experts as the reason for sudden deaths," Nepal's Ambassador Surayanath Mishra told Qatar's The Peninsula newspaper. (5)

To counter the lack of reliable data on work site accidents, four hospitals in Abu Dhabi announced in April that they will launch an online system for collecting injury statistics, including heat exhaustion in the workplace. The scheme could be expanded to cover the whole emirate, by the end of 2011, officials said.

The UAE authorities have given workers a 2 1/2 hour afternoon break during the three hottest months of the year, although there is a get-out clause for employers who can show their labourers are working in a shady environment.

In the face of international criticism of safety standards, governments have been introducing tighter safety controls and have run awareness campaigns for workers and employers.

Countrywide statistics are not easy to find, but the Abu Dhabi Health Authority said there were 551 workplace deaths in all sectors in the emirate during 2010, down from 680 in 2009.

However, health officials quoted by Construction Week said it was not clear from the statistics if the decline in fatalities was due to improved safety standards or the slowdown in construction work. (6)

(1) Human Rights Watch 19 May, 2009 <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/05/18/island-happiness-0>

(2) New York Times, 16 March, 2011: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/arts/design/guggenheim-threatened-with-boycott-over-abu-dhabi-project.html>

(3) Jim Krane, Dubai, the Story of the World's Fastest City, Atlantic Books, page 207.

(4) Site worker death toll exceeds 800, Construction Week, August 6-19, 2005.

(5) The Peninsula, 4 January 2010.

(6) Workplace accident rate drops in Abu Dhabi, Construction Week, 27 February 2011 [www.constructionweekonline.com/article-11190-workplace-accident-rate-drops-in-abu-dhabi/](http://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-11190-workplace-accident-rate-drops-in-abu-dhabi/)

→ Matilde Gattori



# Sponsorship system leaves runaway workers in limbo

**O**n a cool, Gulf winter night, the Toyota carrying Dr. Devanapally Shashikala pulls up alongside a park between the Gold Souk and the spectacular King Faisal Mosque in Sharjah, one of the emirates making up the UAE.

Within seconds, the car is surrounded by men who emerge silently from the shadows as the Indian doctor and her Pakistani assistant unload luke-warm caldrons of rice and vegetable curry.

Dozens of South Asian men soon form a circle beneath palm trees of Al Ittihad Park. They sit on the well-tended grass as the doctor begins to spoon their only meal of the day into the little plastic bags which they each hold.

These men are known here as khalliballi, a slang word meaning “without status.” They have run away from their employers and find themselves in a legal limbo in the United Arab Emirates.

Unable to work legally in the UAE and lacking the money or papers they need to return home, they sleep rough and depend on handouts or any pittance they can earn working as illicit day labourers.

“I’ve had no pay, no shelter and almost no proper food for the past six months,” says Rajan from Hyderabad, now living



→ Paul Ames

illegally in Dubai after fleeing his employer.

“I paid 50,000 rupees (\$1,000) to come here. I was a houseboy in India. The agent told me I would get good pay in Dubai. I worked for a tyre repair company. They promised me I’d get 1,000 dirham (\$270) a month, but they paid me only 400 dirham (\$109).”

Then, the 40-year-old says, they stopped paying altogether, so he fled but was unable to find other work or get back home.

“I’ve two sons and my family is asking why am I not sending

## Jassim, 26, is a Bangladeshi construction worker living in Dubai’s Satwa neighbourhood where he shares a house with dozens of his countrymen living ten to a room

“I work on a construction site near Emirates Towers, but I’ve not been paid for five months.

“I’ve been three years in Dubai. I had a job in Bangladesh, but there is not much money there. I thought by going out of the country, to Dubai, I’d get more money.

“I paid 200,000 in Bangladeshi money to come here, that’s 11,000 dirham (\$3,000). I won’t get that back. I have to send money to my family in Bangladesh, but now I’m not getting any money. My family is calling and asking ‘where is the money? How can we survive our lives?’ I have seven family members in my house, they are always asking for money.

“I’m feeling upset. I’m always asking myself how I can get the money? How am I going to pay the room? I’m feeling very bad and upset because I do not have money to pay the room rent and sometimes I have to pay for food, groceries and sometimes they are not giving me credit.

“I work 10 hours a day, with a one-hour break. If someone helps me to get the money from the company, once I get it I’ll go back to Bangladesh. I was getting 1,500 dirham (\$400) a month, so they owe me over 5,000 (\$1,400). I’ve got my passport with me. If I get the money that the company owes to me, I’ll go back. I think it was a mistake to come to Dubai.”

any money home and why am I staying here? But I have no money and, even if I had it, how can I send money if I have no documents?" Rajan asks as he waits for food in the back alley soup kitchen where Dr. Shashikala's helpers cook up food for the homeless.

After months of waiting, Rajan now has exit papers issued by the Indian embassy and is hopeful of returning even without the promised riches.

The khalliballi are victims of the sponsorship system known as kafala, which is used to hire migrant workers across the Persian Gulf.

In order to work legally, they need to be sponsored by a company in their country of destination. Once they arrive, they can only work for that employer. If they quit, they need the employer's permission to get another job, or to obtain an exit visa to return home.

Employers say such rules are needed to protect their investment in the costs of bringing the workers over. They frequently hold on to the migrants' passports as an additional guarantee that they won't abscond. Critics say the system can amount to forced labour.

Dr. Shashikala has been helping runaway workers since 2007. She doesn't know how many migrants are living outside the law, but she can only provide meals for about 100 everyday. Sometimes, when she runs out of hot food, she has to buy bread and yoghurt for those who miss out. There is little help from affluent Dubai society.

"We are not getting any support from people because they don't want to be associated with helping the illegals," she says. "I'm having a lot of problems to get money. No organization wants to help us because there is a risk for them. Their embassy is not very much interested."

In the mornings, the men living around the park hope to earn some money as day labourers and line up to await the pickup trucks of black market employers. They often are cheated again. "At the end of the day, they don't pay the money, but the people keep saying well maybe this one will pay later, later, later," says Dr. Shashikala.

Those working illegally are often taken to construction projects in the desert away from the eyes of the police. Conditions can be unhealthy and dangerous, but if they fall sick or

get injured they run the risk of detection and imprisonment for working illegally.

Dr. Shashikala holds up a picture of a man chained to a hospital bed.

"In this case, he sustained a knee injury. He needs the support of four people to walk, but even here they put a leg cuff on him."

Dr. Shashikala says she also has to treat the illegals' psychological scars. "There are cases of depression and suicide if they don't get support. One of these boys waiting for clearance documents finally said, if he doesn't get those documents in a couple of days he will hang himself on a tree. By helping these people I'm saving many lives. I keep that in mind all the time."

The runaway migrants are not the group trapped in a legal no man's land in the Gulf region. Tens of thousands of stateless people known as "bidoon" are pushed to the margins of society, denied papers and subjected to discrimination in employment, healthcare and schooling.

"They are really facing more inhuman living conditions than the migrant labourers," says, an Emirati human rights campaigner.

"Some of them are abused by the big companies and used as cheap labour because you don't have to create contracts for them . . . they will accept any kind of pay check. It is a miserable situation."

The bidoon come from a variety of backgrounds. Many have lived in their homelands for generations and claim descent from nomadic tribespeople who neglected to obtain citizenship when states along the Gulf coast broke away from British rule in the 1960s and '70s. Others have roots among trading communities originally from Iran, India or Zanzibar.

An Emirate human rights campaigner believes there are around 30,000 in the UAE, but some estimates put the total as high as 100,000. In Kuwait, where estimates run up to 120,000, bidoon took to the streets in February to demand civil rights. There are also significant numbers in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar. The UAE authorities announced in 2006 that efforts would be taken to resolve the Bidoon issue, but plans to regularize their status have made little progress.

### Twenty-three-year-old Joy is an illegal labourer in Dubai living in a charity-run shelter. He spoke while waiting for a ladle of rice and curry from a backstreet soup kitchen

"I came here on a visit visa and have been here for two years. I have no company, no job, no money. I do some little work, for sub-constructors, but they don't pay me for it.

"An agent brought me over, I paid him 2 lakhs in Bangladesh (\$3,000), and when I got here they took my passport. I don't have any documents. I don't even know the passport number.

"I want to go back home. I'm just waiting for emergency papers from the Bangladeshi Embassy. I should never have come here."

Ali, from the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, came to work in

Dubai as a tailor, a skilled and usually relatively well-paid job.

"I've been here for two years on employment visa. For six months I worked in a company, but they did not pay the salary, so I came out. Now for nearly 20 months I've been working outside.

"When I went to the company to request the return of my passport, they refused to give it back. So now I'm hoping to get an emergency paper.

"I'm staying in a shelter now and I want to go home. It's very distressing because I'm not working anymore."

# Seafarers left stranded as Gulf shipping evades regulation



→ Magnum

Ship's crews stranded off the coast of the UAE by bankrupt owners or forced into complex legal proceedings to reclaim unpaid wages have no labour representatives to help them. Trade unions are banned, but the sailors can turn to Rev. Stephen Miller and his Mission to Seafarers.

"We have had cases of people not being paid for years," the Anglican priest explains. "There is redress but it's cumbersome, expensive and time-consuming."

Shipping lanes through the Persian Gulf are among the World's busiest. With the economic growth of recent decades, ports like Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar have expanded rapidly. Dubai's Jebel Ali port is the world's biggest man-made harbour and the largest port in the Middle East. The waters off Fujairah on the UAE's east coast host the world's second-largest bunker anchorage used every year by around 10,000 ships carrying 200,000 seafarers.

Miller says the region contains some well-regulated harbours and world-class shipping lines who apply international standards of seafarers' well-being. Unfortunately it also has more than its fair share of unscrupulous owners, ports where rules are ignored and courts ill-equipped to handle seafarers' complaints.

Major problems relate to shipping lanes heading from the UAE to Africa and South Asia, or trade routes around the Gulf such as those linking the UAE to ports in Iran and Iraq, which are still plied by the traditional dhows moored in Dubai Creek.

Miller says the implementation of the ILO's 2006 Maritime Labour Convention should bring significantly improved protection for seafarers working on shipping lanes linking the Gulf to Europe or North America, but it will take time before the benefits filter down to sailors on less well-controlled routes. (1)

"It won't alter the fact that those inspectors will still go for the international shipping rather than the local Gulf trade or the trade between India and the Gulf," he explained in an interview.

"It's been known for a long time that 10 percent of world shipping is below standard, not necessarily falling to pieces, but it is below regulation, and that 10 percent of shipping will migrate to trade routes where there is little or no regulation."

Unscrupulous owners operating on those routes have no trouble finding crew members who are even willing to pay for a job on their ships.

"If you are coming from a country like Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, for every 10 seafarers there is probably one job. They are climbing on each others shoulders to try and get out. Some seafarers will come onto a ship in the UAE, and they may well have paid \$5,000 for that job," Miller says.

"They may have been promised they'll get \$500 a month and they'll want to stay 18 months. The reality is they'll come without a contract, and then the ship-owner will say

'I only promised \$100 a month,' so they'll then work for 18 months and are still \$3,200 dollars in arrears."

The contraction in world trade that followed the economic crisis of 2008 left many crews stranded without pay. In early 2011, Miller says he is usually dealing with about half-a-dozen stranded crews, normally on ships in the smaller ports of the UAE's northern emirates.

Two sailors stuck on the Al Manara 2 cargo ship in the port of Ajman were finally able to go home in November after 15 months trapped onboard. Juma Mohammed Mkumba from Tanzania and his Filipino shipmate Nelson Aguilar were stranded after the ship's debt-laden owner disappeared. They were unable to come ashore because, as is usual with seafarers, they were not issued entry visas but only a shore pass that is valid only for stays of up to 21 days.

The Mission to Seafarers provided the men with food, water and phone credits that enabled them to stay in touch with their families. It is also supporting their efforts to recover a total of \$30,000 owed to the men in back wages.

"It's usual here that the owners don't pay for four months, or five months," says Anil, a former sailor. "It was already happening before the recession, because these owners do not have a proper system, they don't know the proper procedures. It happens too much."

Anil himself was stranded on a ship for seven months in the early 2000s and fought a three-year court battle to recover unpaid wages. He now works as a boat manager and provides volunteer help to other seafarers.



→ Magnum

As we drank tea in his cosy office decorated with ships charts and maritime bric-a-brac, he received a text message from the Indian crew of a vessel operating between Dubai and the Iraqi port of Basra. After failing to pay their wages for a year, the Iraqi owner had vanished leaving the crew stranded in the Shatt al-Arab waterway off Basra with no money for fuel or food.

"I told them to contact the Indian embassy in Baghdad, but Baghdad is very far from Basra. I hope they will send somebody to help them."

1- Maritime Labour Convention, ILO, 7 February, 2006 [www.ilo.org/global/standards/maritime-labour-convention/WCMS\\_090250/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/maritime-labour-convention/WCMS_090250/lang-en/index.htm)

## David is a taxi driver from Eritrea working in Qatari capital of Doha. Like many drivers he says he was promised a good salary, then told he had to make his living from commissions.

"I have to pay 260 riyals (\$70) a day to rent my taxi. Sometimes I get it, sometimes I have a loss. I will fight until the end of the day to get it.

"You know when I came here I didn't even read the agreement, because it was all agreed by our embassy. They told us, 'come there is chance for work in Qatar.' I'd been 12 years in the army, so I when I got the change to get away, automatically I went for it.

"When I got here, I worked for seven months with a salary. I got 1,400 riyals (\$385) every month. After that they started charging for rental. I came here to get a wage, but they told me your agreement is that after six months they change the agreement to rental. They just did this and they said 'that's your agreement.' They do this to everybody. Some days there are no customers, but praise God, I do not lose. One day, I lose but I make it up the next day. I'm working 11 hours a day not to lose.

"I have free accommodation: six people in one room, but it's free at least. All I pay for is my food. I share with others from Eritrea. The houses are good. We have everything, air conditioning. Most of the taxi drivers are from Asia. The Indian people, the Nepalese, they have to pay too much money to come here. I feel bad always about that. But you know that the government of Qatar and Eritrea they have good relationship, I came for free. I didn't pay anything,

even the air ticket the company paid. In car work they are bringing more people from Kenya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Sudan.

"In this country the big problem is not the Qatari people. In the middle, between the Qatari and the employee, there are many people and they get many commissions. They tell the Qatari boss my salary is 4,000 riyals (\$1,000) including accommodation, electricity, water, but the people in the middle take the money and put it in their own pockets. The Qatari don't know that, they just think they give too much money.

"The general manager is Qatari, but he is innocent. He don't know nothing, he is only like an umbrella for the company. The people running the company are Indian, from Kerala, and they only look after their own people.

"In this country, if you gather together to go to the office, they will not accept you. Many times we wrote a letter to them, but they don't accept it. I don't know, maybe they don't give it to the administration because the Qatari guy in the administration, he is a very educated person. The Indians, they do not let us get close to the boss. Every time they send him a report saying everything is very nice, very good, saying there is no problem and the manger accepts that. He is very happy."

## Country Profile: Qatar

**Area:** 11,600 square kilometres (roughly the size of Jamaica).

**Population:** 1.7 million

**Main nationalities:** 425,000 Qataris; 500,000 Indians; 350,000 Nepalese; 160,000 Filipino.

**Main cities:** Doha (capital); Al Rayyan.

**Politics:** Power is held by the hereditary monarch, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. There are no political parties, and plans to hold elections for a council to advise the emir have been repeatedly postponed. The 35-member council is currently appointed by the emir, as are cabinet ministers.

**Economy:** By some counts, Qatar is the world's richest country with a GDP per capita of \$88,200. Growth in 2010 was 16 percent. The tiny country sits on the world's third largest natural gas reserves. Qatar has also successfully sought to diversify its economy through manufacturing, financial services and tourism. The 2022 World Cup is expected to give a big boost to its tourism credentials.

**History:** Qatar declared independence in 1971 after Britain pulled out of the Persian Gulf. Negotiations on union with the emirates of the UAE failed. Once one of the poorest Arab states, Qatar saw its economy take off with the development of oil industry in the decades after World War II.

**Union rights:** Restrictions on workers' organizations make effective trade unions virtually impossible. Although collective bargaining and the right to strike are recognized by law, conditions and restrictions severely limit the scope of bargaining and effectively neutralise the right to strike. Public servants, domestic workers and those in "essential services" such as health, transport and the oil and gas sector are banned from striking.



## Country Profile: UAE

**Area:** 83,600 square kilometres (roughly the size of Austria).

**Population:** 4.7 million

**Main nationalities:** 900,000 Emiratis, 1.75 million Indians, 1.25 million Pakistanis, 500,000 Bangladeshis; 1 million other Asian; 500,000 European and African.

**Main cities:** Abu Dhabi (capital); Dubai, Sharjah, Al Ain.

**Politics:** The country is a federation made up of seven, semi-autonomous emirates. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi, is president. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai, is vice-president, prime minister and minister of defence. The President is chosen by the Federal Supreme Council made up of the rulers of the seven emirates. Political parties are banned. The 40 seat parliament (Federal National Council) is half appointed by the rulers of the emirates, and half elected by an electoral college of 6,689 Emiratis themselves appointed by the rulers.

**Economy:** The UAE is one of the world's richest and, until it was hard hit by the 2008-9 slump, fastest growing economies. GDP per capita \$37,000. Growth rate 2010, 2.5 percent. The wealth was based on huge oil and gas reserves, but in recent years, the country has diversified into services, tourism and manufacturing. Hydrocarbons now represent just 25 percent of GDP.

**History:** The UAE was founded in 1971 after the so-called Trucial Coast States gained independence from Britain.

The British took control in of the coast in the 19th century to prevent pirates based there from threatening its trade with India.

**Union rights:** The law does not permit trade unions. The right to collective bargaining is not recognized in law. The right to strike is not recognized, and public sector workers and the migrant workers who make up the vast majority of the workforce are banned from striking.

