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## Human Rights Council

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**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Institut International pour les Droits et le Développement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 August 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Labor Rights and Discrimination Faced by Migrant Workers in the United Arab Emirates**

The protection of workers' rights is a fundamental aspect of human rights, as enshrined in international conventions, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, recent manifestations and protests by Bangladeshi workers in the United Arab Emirates have highlighted significant concerns regarding the treatment of migrant workers, particularly in terms of discrimination, labor rights, and fair working conditions.

### **Background: The Plight of Bangladeshi Workers in the United Arab Emirates**

The United Arab Emirates has long relied on migrant labor to support its rapid economic development, with workers from Bangladesh comprising a significant portion of this workforce. These workers often take on demanding and low-paid jobs in construction, domestic service, and other sectors. Despite their essential contributions to the United Arab Emirates' economy, many Bangladeshi workers face harsh working conditions, including long hours, inadequate pay, poor living conditions, and, in some cases, physical and emotional abuse.

Recent protests by Bangladeshi workers have brought to light the systemic discrimination and exploitation that many of them endure. These manifestations have not only highlighted the grievances of these workers but have also underscored the need for urgent action to address the broader issue of labor rights in the United Arab Emirates.

### **The Right to Work and Non-Discrimination**

The right to work under just and favorable conditions is a basic human right. It includes the right to fair wages, safe working conditions, equal opportunities, and protection from discrimination. Unfortunately, many migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates, particularly those from Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, face severe violations of these rights.

#### **1. Discrimination and Exploitation:**

- Bangladeshi workers in the United Arab Emirates often face discrimination based on their nationality, race, and economic status. This discrimination manifests in lower wages, inferior working conditions, and limited access to legal recourse compared to workers from other countries. The Kafala (sponsorship) system, which ties workers to their employers, exacerbates this situation by restricting workers' mobility and making them vulnerable to exploitation.

#### **2. Inadequate Legal Protections:**

- While the United Arab Emirates has made some strides in reforming its labor laws, significant gaps remain, particularly in protecting the rights of low-income migrant workers. Many workers are not fully aware of their legal rights or are too afraid to report abuses due to fear of retaliation, including deportation. This lack of legal protection and enforcement allows abusive practices to persist, undermining the dignity and well-being of these workers.

### **3. Poor Living Conditions:**

- Migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates often live in overcrowded and unsanitary labor camps, far removed from the cities where they work. These conditions not only violate basic human dignity but also pose serious health risks, particularly during pandemics or other public health emergencies.

### **Recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council**

In light of these issues, it is imperative that the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) takes decisive action to address the plight of Bangladeshi and other migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates. The following recommendations are proposed to ensure that the rights of these workers are respected, protected, and fulfilled:

#### **1. Promote Comprehensive Labor Reforms:**

- The UNHRC should urge the United Arab Emirates government to undertake comprehensive labor reforms that include the abolition of the Kafala system. These reforms should ensure that all workers, regardless of their nationality or economic status, have access to fair wages, safe working conditions, and the freedom to change employers without facing legal or financial penalties.

#### **2. Strengthen Legal Protections and Enforcement:**

- The UNHRC should advocate for the strengthening of legal protections for migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates. This includes ensuring that labor laws are fully aligned with international human rights standards, improving access to legal recourse for workers, and establishing stronger enforcement mechanisms to prevent and address abuses.

#### **3. Combat Discrimination and Promote Equal Treatment:**

- The UNHRC should call on the United Arab Emirates to implement measures that combat discrimination against migrant workers, particularly those from Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. This includes ensuring equal pay for equal work, regardless of nationality, and promoting a culture of respect and inclusion in the workplace.

#### **4. Improve Living Conditions for Workers:**

- The UNHRC should encourage the United Arab Emirates to improve living conditions for migrant workers, including providing access to adequate housing, sanitation, and healthcare. This is especially important in labor camps, where the majority of low-income workers reside.

#### **5. Enhance Worker Awareness and Support:**

- The UNHRC should support initiatives aimed at increasing awareness among migrant workers about their rights. This includes providing information in workers' native languages and offering legal and social support services to help them navigate the challenges they face in the United Arab Emirates.

## **6. Facilitate International Cooperation:**

- The UNHRC should facilitate dialogue and cooperation between the United Arab Emirates and migrant-sending countries like Bangladesh to ensure the protection of workers' rights. This includes promoting bilateral agreements that guarantee fair treatment and working conditions for migrant workers and providing support for their safe repatriation when necessary.

## **Conclusion**

The recent manifestations by Bangladeshi workers in the United Arab Emirates have brought to the forefront the critical issues of labor rights and discrimination faced by migrant workers. It is the responsibility of the international community, and specifically the United Nations Human Rights Council, to take action to protect these vulnerable workers and ensure that their rights are upheld.

The recommendations outlined in this statement provide a roadmap for the UNHRC to strengthen its efforts in promoting labor rights and combating discrimination in the United Arab Emirates and beyond. By promoting comprehensive labor reforms, strengthening legal protections, combating discrimination, improving living conditions, enhancing worker awareness, and facilitating international cooperation, the UNHRC can help build a more just and equitable world where the rights of all workers are respected and protected.

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