

Labour Law Reforms in Qatar: Challenges and Opportunities for Business

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank our co-convenors: the Qatar Chamber, the Ministry of Labour and the ILO. I really only have one message but one which I want to deliver clearly as someone who has also worked in business. It is the same message I delivered to international companies and Ambassadors here two years ago. Responsible business is no longer a choice - it is essential for all of you as the world looks increasingly on Qatar now the Russia World Cup is over. The legacy of the World Cup and progress towards Qatar's 2030 Vision depends on the actions all stakeholders, including business, over the months and years ahead.

There has been real progress over these past two years. At the very highest levels, the State of Qatar has made a renewed commitment towards labour reform and earlier this year the International Labour Organization opened their office here – a sign of good faith and cooperation. The Supreme Committee for the Delivery and Legacy of Qatar 2022 continues to make solid steps forwards for the 30,000 workers under their responsibility – from the repayment of recruitment fees, joint health and safety inspections with a global union federation and independent third party monitoring. This aligns well with United Nations standards to Protect, Respect and Remedy the human rights of everyone – and for business to also play its role in undertaking all necessary steps to prevent harm and to remedy abuses when they are found.

In a world of greater transparency, driven by technologies such as blockchain, international companies around the world know that labour rights are material to the trust society places in them. Soon customers will know much more not just about what is in products they buy but also what lies behind the services they use – including hotels, food and transport. Transparency is coming to us all and so we better be ready for it. For businesses here that are looking to export abroad, then these issues will come sooner as tariffs too are increasingly linked to human rights concerns. I have seen Chambers of Commerce and business associations in other countries play leading roles in helping prepare their members for such moments of greater scrutiny.

One significant issue that needs much more progress is that of responsible recruitment. The problem is not unique to Qatar - there are businesses all over the world dealing with this right now. But the message here is simple. None of us should have to buy our jobs. We do not expect our brothers, sisters and children to have to take large debts, mortgages or loans in order to purchase jobs in a faraway land. This practice is illegal under Qatari law but all of us know that most of the migrant workers

coming to build countries such as yours are paying these fees in countries of origin. You might say this is their problem and not your problem but I would beg to differ. Having such practices in your labour supply chains will become a problem for us all as the spotlight of 2022 shines ever brighter.

We will hear today and tomorrow from companies who have taken steps to clean up their labour supply chains. Concrete steps of due diligence, prevention and remediation. If the workers are not to pay these recruitment fees then it is companies here, as well as your suppliers, who must do so. Yes, this and new commitments to a minimum wage will make labour more expensive, but we are talking about human lives – lives worthy of dignity and respect as much as our own. This is the central message of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in Paris on 10 December 1948, a 70-year birthday we will be celebrating in a few weeks time.

Qatar has now made many of the essential commitments. Earlier this year the government signed the two key United Nations human rights instruments – the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. You are the third such country in this region to do so. This country has also shown humility in accepting that labour abuses still persist and has welcomed critical friends into the country to work with you. This spirit of openness and cooperation can only help as we now look for action by business itself across international labour supply chains.

This is a country with a proud history of hospitality and welcome. There have been good examples of promising practice on labour rights in Qatar, which we'll hear about later today. This good practice now needs to be scaled up to advance the rights of everyone. This means recognising the rights of all and that your responsibility as businesses extends far beyond the borders of this country. You have friends willing to help you in this journey.