**Role of Organized Criminal Groups with regard to Contemporary Forms of Slavery**

**Case Study: The Africans in the Arab Gulf Countries**

Submitted by: **Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights - Egypt**

To: **Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences**

Date: **April 2021**

Purpose: **To inform the Special Rapporteur’s forthcoming report to the 76th session of the General Assembly.**

**Preface**

The modern forms of slavery and servitude require collaboration and coordination among different governments and countries from around the world in order to shape a new well-designed international frame to reduce these phenomena.

One of the new regions of the world that witnesses this pressing issue is the Arab gulf due to its high economic status and the increasing gross domestic product so that many people from different regions – especially from the African countries – dream to work there. However, due to the difficult procedures of getting a legal working status, some of them try to travel and work illegally putting themselves in danger under the tough measures of the organized criminal groups and even those who have a legal status to work in the Arab Gulf may face other forms of servitude and modern slavery.

Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights would like to address this problem through this report bearing in mind the disadvantages of the increasing number of illegal workers and the role of organized criminal groups to give recommendations for both the governments of the Arab Gulf countries and the Nongovernmental Organizations to reduce this phenomenon.

**1: The Contemporary Forms of Slavery in the Arab Gulf**

The six countries that form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar – host the majority of the estimated 23 million migrant workers living in the Arab states.

The six countries are some of the richest countries in the world. In contrary, they have also become notorious for the systematic abuse and exploitation of the migrant workers who contribute so much to their economies due to the increasing number of the trans-boundary organized criminal groups. Unpaid wages, forced labour, dangerous working conditions and unsanitary accommodation facilities are too often part and parcel of the illegal migration experience[[1]](#footnote-1).

Many of the organized criminal groups have negatively used the ‘kafala’ sponsorship system that many of GCC states operate versions of it which ties the workers’ legal right to be in the country to their contracts. This means people risk being imprisoned or deported if they leave their jobs without the permission of their employers as migrant workers cannot even leave the country without such permission[[2]](#footnote-2).

**2: The spread of COVID-19 has put migrant workers at even greater risk**

Throughout the Gulf, COVID-19 is shining a spotlight on the unsanitary, overcrowded conditions many migrant workers live in, and their precarious legal status. Suddenly, the consequences of denying people their basic rights are impossible to ignore but due to the fact that many of them are illegal immigrants, the situation gets more complicated[[3]](#footnote-3).

By taking the right actions to protect migrant workers now, governments and businesses in the GCC could start to turn the tide on years of abuse. Gulf countries must start to treat migrant workers equally and eliminate all systems that discriminate against them and infringe on their human right and they have also to cut the transactions of the organized criminal groups[[4]](#footnote-4).

**3: The current situation of organized criminal groups deployed migrant workers**

The majority of migrant workers deployed by the organized criminal groups in the Gulf countries are low-paid labourers and they are often accommodated in dormitory-style “labour camps”.

Generally speaking, they are provided small rooms as accommodation which are typically shared between six and 12 people who sleep in bunkbeds. Workers tend to share communal bathrooms and kitchens which are often unsanitary and inadequate, sometimes even lacking electricity and running water[[5]](#footnote-5).

No one should ever be living in these conditions, but the spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the severity of the situation and the need to urgently rectify it. Following hygiene guidelines and adhering to social distancing measures are all but impossible in these circumstances.

Acknowledging the magnitude of this issue, some governments have taken steps to try to limit overcrowding. For example, the Bahrain government urged employers to ensure that no more than five workers are housed in a room and that each worker should be three meters away from the other. In Kuwait, some workers were reportedly evacuated from their labour camps to alternative accommodation[[6]](#footnote-6).

In Qatar, the government introduced new health and safety guidelines to protect workers in labour accommodation and on construction sites, and in coordination with compa, nies are trying to implement stricter hygiene standards.

Lack of transparency and access makes it difficult to assess the success and implementation of such measures across the region, and it is unclear whether companies are fully complying with them.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**4: Recruitment groups**

While continued international pressure on the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar has managed to improve the working conditions of many South Asian and Southeast Asian migrants, recruitment agencies are now moving on to Africa. Detailed labor statistics are hard to come by in the region, but data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs suggests that there are more than 636,000 Sudanese migrants in the Gulf, as well as up to 300,000 Kenyans. Many of the workers flooding the Persian Gulf States are from Somalia, Ethiopia or Uganda — countries with little capacity to guarantee the fair treatment of their citizens abroad[[8]](#footnote-8).

In a busy recruitment agency in Nairobi’s central business district, dozens of women were applying. All hope that today they will secure a job as a domestic worker in the Gulf States, cooking, cleaning and caring for another family thousands of miles from their own homes.

A female worker said "The first time I went, I went in an illegal, chaotic situation through brokers who did not prepare us for what lay ahead."

Reports of east African workers being raped and tortured across the region and haunting videos of Kenyan women pleading for help after allegedly being abused by their employers saw the Kenyan government follow other countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines in banning its citizens from travelling to work in the Gulf in 2014[[9]](#footnote-9).

Since then the government has been grappling with how to allow women and the country’s economy to benefit from the huge demand for migrant domestic workers from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while keeping those who want to travel for work safe.

Before, Kenyan recruitment agencies had no legal obligation to bring women facing abuse home. Under the new rules, if a Kenyan woman is abused, agencies must help them leave, with the cost of their rescue coming out of a 1.5m Kenyan shilling (£11,000) bond that the agent has to pay to operate[[10]](#footnote-10).

**Conclusion**

In the light of the above mentioned, Maat for Peace, Human Rights and Development recommends the Arab Gulf States in cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council to:

* Prevent the activities of the organized recruitment criminal groups and agencies.
* Coordinate their efforts with the sending states, especially in Eastern Africa, to legalize the status of migrant workers.
* Cancel the "Kafala" Sponsorship System or reform it like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
1. Amnesty International, COVID-19 makes Gulf countries’ abuse of migrant workers impossible to ignore, 2020, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/covid19-makes-gulf-countries-abuse-of-migrant-workers-impossible-to-ignore/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Guardian, 'They see us as slaves': Kenyan women head for the Gulf despite abuse fears, 2021, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/oct/29/kenyan-women-gulf-despite-abuse-fears-domestic-workers> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. OZY, RISING IN THE MIDDLE EAST: FORCED LABOR FROM AFRICA, 2018, available at: <https://www.ozy.com/the-new-and-the-next/rising-in-the-middle-east-forced-labor-from-africa/82554/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. TRT World, Saudi enjoys ‘impunity’ over torture and abuse of migrant workers – HRW, 2020, available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/saudi-enjoys-impunity-over-torture-and-abuse-of-migrant-workers-hrw-42418> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Op.cit [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. TRT, Black migrants in Saudi Arabia suffer in ‘hellish’ deportation centres, 2020, available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/black-migrants-in-saudi-arabia-suffer-in-hellish-deportation-centres-39350> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)