



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

15 April 2020

Qatar: Migrant workers illegally expelled during COVID-19 pandemic

Qatari authorities rounded up and expelled dozens of migrant workers after telling them they were being taken to be tested for COVID-19, Amnesty International has learned.

The organization interviewed 20 men from Nepal who were apprehended by Qatari police, alongside hundreds of others, in March. The police told most of the men that they were going to be tested for COVID-19 and would be returned to their accommodation afterwards. Instead, they were taken to detention centres and held in appalling conditions for several days, before being sent to Nepal.

“None of the men we spoke to had received any explanation for why they were treated this way, nor were they able to challenge their detention or expulsion. After spending days in inhumane detention conditions, many were not even given the chance to collect their belongings before they were put on planes to Nepal,” said Steve Cockburn, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director of Global Issues.

“It is disturbing that the Qatari authorities appear to have used the pandemic as a smokescreen for further abuses against migrant workers, many of whom feel police misled them by saying that they were to be ‘tested’. COVID-19 is no excuse for arbitrarily rounding people up.

“The authorities must provide reparations for the way that these men have been treated, and consider allowing those who have been expelled to return to Qatar if they so wish. The men’s employers must also urgently pay the salary and employment benefits they are owed.”

Apprehended and detained

On Thursday 12 and Friday 13 March, hundreds of migrant workers were rounded up and detained by police in parts of Doha including the Industrial Area, Barwa City, and Labour City. They were apprehended whilst away from their accommodation, carrying out errands or shopping for groceries.

Some workers said the police specifically told them that they were being taken to be tested for COVID-19, and would be brought back to their accommodation later. Other workers said the police spoke to them in Arabic and the only word they could understand was ‘Corona’.

One man told Amnesty International: “We were asked to stop to test for the virus. Police told us that the doctor would come and check the virus. But they lied to us.”

The men were then crammed on to buses, and taken to a detention facility in the Industrial Area where their documents and mobile phones were confiscated, before having their photographs and fingerprints taken. The workers were detained in inhumane conditions alongside scores of other people from various countries. They were held in overcrowded cells without beds or bedding, and not given enough food or water.

One Nepali man told Amnesty International: “The jail was full of people. We were given one piece of bread each day, which was not enough. All the people were fed in a group, with food lying on plastic on the floor. Some were not able to snatch the food because of the crowd.”

Out of the 20 interviewed, only three said they had their temperature checked while they were in the detention facility.

Expulsions

While they were in detention, the men Amnesty International interviewed were told they were being expelled, with some only learning about it while being taken to the airport. Some were expelled on 15 March, and others on 19 March. None were able to challenge their detention or expulsion.

Some were given just a few minutes to pack their belongings, while others were not given the chance to collect anything at all. One man said: “I was handcuffed and treated like a criminal. I was taken to my camp to collect belongings, but how could I collect and pack the luggage since my hands were chained?”

Most workers said they had their temperatures taken at Hamad International Airport before boarding their flights, and again upon landing in Kathmandu.

Some said the police threatened to bring criminal charges against them and keep them in the detention facility longer if they complained or tried to challenge the situation.

Payments owed

Of the 20 people interviewed, only two said they have been contacted by the companies they worked for, offering to pay their salaries. One man said he was given cash by his company whilst in detention, but a police officer took it for ‘safekeeping’ and failed to return it. The other man said his company asked him to open a bank account to send him his wages.

All of the workers left Qatar without receiving their owed salary and end-of-service benefits, a particular concern as many will have spent huge sums on securing jobs in Qatar and may well be paying back high-interest loans.

One man said: “It is difficult now. My children do not have clothes, it is tough to feed them.” Another said he was being threatened by a moneylender and was struggling to support his five children.

Qatar Government response

In response to Amnesty International’s evidence, the Qatari Government said that while inspecting the Industrial Area as part of the COVID-19 response, “officials uncovered individuals engaged in illegal and illicit activity. This included the manufacture and sale of banned and prohibited substances, along with the sale of dangerous food goods that could seriously threaten the health of people if consumed”.

However, 18 of those interviewed by Amnesty International said they were not aware of any charges or accusations brought against them. Two others said that a fellow detainee who spoke Arabic told them that they were accused of supplying alcohol. Neither the police nor any officials informed them of such charges, which they strongly denied to Amnesty International.

Amnesty International reviewed documents in Arabic that were given to the men, which do not suggest they were charged with any criminal offence. In any event, none of the men interviewed were allowed to challenge the legality of their detention and eventual expulsion, as required under international human rights law.

Recommendations

Amnesty International is calling on the Qatar authorities to ensure that any worker detained and threatened with expulsion is informed of the reasons and allowed to challenge them. Qatar should also ensure effective remedy and reparation for any worker whose rights have been violated. The Qatari authorities must also ensure all migrant workers’ right to health is fully protected during the COVID-19 crisis.

ENDS

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact: laurie.hanna@amnesty.org

Out of hours contact details:

+44 20 7413 5566

email: press@amnesty.org

Twitter: @amnestypress