

COMMENTARY

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FIFA President Blatter Signals Mounting Pressure on Qatar to Tackle Migrant Worker Problems

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A warning by world soccer body FIFA president Sepp Blatter following talks with Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani that Qatar needs to do more to improve the working and living conditions of its migrant workers is the latest signal that Qatar will have to take substantive steps to fend off attempts to deprive it of its 2022 World Cup hosting rights.

Blatter's comments have particular significance given that he never was an enthusiastic supporter of efforts by human rights groups and trade unions to use the World Cup as leverage to persuade Qatar to substantially reform its kafala or sponsorship system that puts employees at the mercy of their employers.

The FIFA president's talks with Sheikh Tamim were designed to fend off mounting criticism of Qatar within the soccer body and to portray Mr. Blatter in advance of FIFA presidential elections as sensitive to a trend among international sports associations spearheaded by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to make human rights a factor in the future awarding of hosting rights for mega sport events.

Blatter's visit to Doha followed calls by outgoing FIFA executive committee member Theo Zwanziger to strip Qatar of its hosting rights and a warning that the next FIFA congress could see a motion tabled by member associations to replace Qatar with another host country. FIFA's executive committee meets this week to approve moving the dates of the Qatar tournament from June/July to November/December because of the Gulf state's suffocating summer temperatures.

Zwanziger's successor in the executive committee, German Football Association president Wolfgang Niersbach, who takes up his office in May, is believed to be equally critical of Qatar. German Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel called for improved working conditions during a visit to a construction site in Doha earlier this month.

Qatar has responded to criticism by engaging with its critics; promising legislative reform of the kafala system; issuing standards for the working and living conditions by two major Qatari institutions, including the 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy; and implementing initial measures such as streamlining the payment of wages to ensure that workers are paid on time.

Human rights groups have welcomed the measures but have warned that the Gulf state would lose credibility if it fails to quickly implement sweeping, more convincing reforms. An Amnesty International researcher, Mustafa Qadri, noted at the end of a two-week visit to Qatar that little on the ground had changed for migrant workers, who constitute the majority of Qatar's population.

Blatter's warning is further significant because it came against a background of initial grassroots moves to express opposition to Qatar hosting the World Cup. An online petition on Avaaz.org has already garnered some 850,000 signatures. In addition to the petition, The Boycott Shop has started selling online Boycott Qatar 2022 T-shirts.

"As global citizens, we're deeply concerned by the conditions migrant workers in Qatar are forced to work under for the 2022 World Cup. We urge you to put in place a public policy that ensures every worker on World Cup sites can keep their passports, are granted exit visas, and protected with basic rights and safeties. We also call on the Qatari government to reform its 'guest' worker programme and allow any foreign labourer the right to return home. These changes would inspire global confidence in Qatar and CH2M Hill, and have a dramatic impact on the 1.4 million migrants working in the country," the petition said. US company CH2M Hill serves as the Supreme Committee's program management consultant.

The organizers of the petition are likely to achieve their target of one million signatures. "If more than 1 million of us stand together for freedom, we can confront her with our voices every time she leaves her house to go to work, or to ski, until she takes action. This same tactic pushed Hilton Hotels to protect women against sex trafficking in days -- join the urgent call to help free Qatar's modern slaves," they said on Avaaz.org, referring to Colorado-based CH2M CEO Jacqueline Hinman.

Sheikh Tamim has raised the stakes by declaring in a CNN interview last year that the plight of migrant workers pained him. Sheikh Tamim apparently reiterated his support for labour reform in his talks with Blatter. ""It is encouraging to hear the Emir's personal commitment to workers'

welfare and to get a sense of the improvements planned for all workers in Qatar. It is clear that Qatar takes its responsibility as host seriously and sees the FIFA World Cup as a catalyst for positive social change," Blatter said.

Sheikh Tamim's support was crucial to enhancing the credibility of declared Qatari intentions. Yet, at the same time it increases pressure on Qatar to act swiftly at a time that the government is caught in a Catch-22 between the need to demonstrate sincerity to its critics and a domestic requirement to move slowly to support for reforms.

A majority of Qataris is believed to be concerned about sweeping reform, if not abolition, of the kafala system. Many Qataris fear given the fact that they constitute only 12 percent of the Gulf state's total population that change will open up a Pandora's Box in which foreigners will demand greater rights that could jeopardize Qatari control of their society and culture.

Qatar could take a number of steps to manage the diverging expectations of foreign critics and Qataris and buy the time it needs to implement reforms, but has yet to do so.

Those steps could include a dramatic rather than an incremental increase of labour inspectors who monitor adherence to existing rules and regulations; guarantees to business owners comparable to those provided by the US Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) provided to bank depositors that would allay fears that abolishing exit permits could prompt expatriate business managers to abscond with company funds; incorporation into national legislation of the workers standards adopted by the Supreme Committee and the Qatar Foundation; and creation of an independent commission to monitor labour reform as suggested by a report by law firm DLA Piper that was endorsed by the Qatari government.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/03/fifa-president-blatter-signals-mounting.html>

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