

Migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

A snapshot of the UAE

With a growth rate of **2.5 per cent in 2010** and an estimated **GDP per capita of \$37,000**, the UAE is ranked as one of the richest economies in the world.¹ Much of this success can be attributed to a vast supply of cheap labour, consisting of those workers keen to escape the poverty of their home countries. In the UAE, migrant workers make up a **staggering 90 per cent of the labour force**.² According to recent estimates, the working population consists of 1.75 million Indians, 1.25 million Pakistanis, 500,000 Bangladeshis; 1 million other Asian; 500,000 European and African.³

In recent years the UAE has sought to diversify its economy, developing industries in **tourism, real estate and manufacturing**. This shift away from oil production marks a clear recognition by the state that its over reliance on oil profits cannot be sustained given, both, the inevitable **depletion of these oil resources** and the fickleness of demand as the recent recession effects have confirmed.

The lavish displays of decadence and wealth that forms the visual imagery of cities such as Dubai have been part of a **careful marketing strategy to bolster tourism and the purchasing power it brings with it**. Based on its own research, the International Trade Congress in 2011 commented on Dubai's man-made image of Arab enterprise following the construction of the "world's tallest building, most luxurious hotels, the biggest shopping malls and (the) vast artificial islands."⁴

Behind the scenes

Despite this image of abundance, the reality is quite different. The splendour of riches does not, in fact, 'trickle down' for a large number of expatriates - in other words, for a large proportion of the UAE's population. International human rights organisations have described some of the worst examples of labour abuses for the lowest income groups living in the UAE. The most extreme nature of exploitation is the result of the **Kafala sponsorship programme, which allocates disproportionate power to sponsors and employers in determining the legal residence of workers**. In effect, employers are given almost total control over migrant workers' pay, living conditions, nutrition, capacity to change employment, and their ability to return home.⁵

Two of the biggest concerns relate specifically to **debt bondage and the confiscation of passports**. It has been common practice for employment agencies to charge high recruitment fees to workers in their home countries under false promises of high wages. Workers on arrival find themselves **indebted to employers with wages too low** (between US\$175 and \$220 a month) **to manage re-payments**.⁶ Forced labour is also the result of employers withholding labourers' passports, whereby workers choosing to leave their

employers **risk illegal residency status**. Consequently, workers are tied to their employers and the harsh working environments they impose.

A recent report commissioned by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) has exposed the extremities of working conditions, described as something similar to labour camp conditions. In its report findings, construction workers were regularly **exposed to long hours of work (up to 12 hours per day with one day's holiday per week) during times of extreme heat and with very few breaks to compensate.**⁷ Likewise domestic workers also suffer from debt bondage and wage exploitation in addition to sexual abuse. Furthermore, their wellbeing is thought to be at greater risk given the undocumented abuses that occur within the intimate sphere of the home.

Further still, the precarious nature of low paid employment is reinforced by the political environment, which **prohibits labour union activity or other legal mechanisms** for redressing labour conflicts. This has the compounding effect of disempowering workers and their capacity to determine **their employment choices, rights to expression, association and free movement**. As such, these circumstances have led to an **increased trend in worker suicides**. According to a report conducted by the International Labour Force, suicides have become increasingly common among the low-income migrant workers. The death of Athiraman Kannan, a 32-year-old Indian foreman who jumped from the 147th floor of the Burj Khalifa, after being denied his request to leave, was already the 26th known to commit suicide in 2011.⁸ The records provided by Dubai police are worse still **reporting 113 suicides in 2009** - housemaids and construction workers making up most of the victims.⁹

Wider implications – civil unrest and health discrepancies

Civil unrest has been catalysed by larger **economic trends undermining the stability of the Gulf region**. According to the the UAE government's own records, oil revenues accounted for **75.9 % of the UAE's total public revenues in 2010.**¹⁰ International developments have major implications for the UAE, not least of all when considering that there has been a fall in demand for oil against the backdrop of recession. Likewise, inflation and increases in food prices have had a ripple effect on the political economies of Gulf States. The protest initiated by a cohort of Indian workers in Ras Al-Khaimah during July 2008 was itself a response to these pressures. Elsewhere, Labour unrest has also showed its ugly face in Bahrain, Kuwait and Dubai between 2007-08 with the rising cost of living - due in large part to the **low wages that are unable to match such increases.**¹¹As it stands, however, the government has been able to employ short-term measures to impose a culture of fear through **repression, imprisonment and forced deportations**.

The wider health implications of labour migration is yet another concern. With the increased rates of labour imports and human trafficking, due in large part to the rise in sex tourism, the physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing of migrants is put under serious jeopardy. This refers to those suffering from forced labour, sexual exploitation and those separated from family members. The World Health Organization has discussed the

issue of **human displacement at length, referring to it as a top global public health priority**.¹² Similarly, Human Rights Watch has exposed the **overcrowded and unhygienic living arrangements of migrants, correlating it with the spread of disease**, referring to the outbreak of chickenpox in a Sharjah labor camp in 2008.¹³ According to WHO, host countries' negligence of basic health needs are not only creating widespread damage, through disease and dislocation, but are undermining one of the most fundamental human rights principles: According to its 1946 constitution:

“the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being...health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”¹⁴

Labour market dualisms and the ‘commodification’ of labour

The unequal distribution of wealth and power among nationals and the non-nationals is clearly displayed by the superior positions held by Emiratis in the public sector – who enjoy high standards of living and often with very few links to actual performance or merit.¹⁵ By way of contrast, non-nationals are consigned to work in the private sector and constitute a more diversified group relative to their skillsets. While the level of skills determines the bargaining power of those expatriates, the **denial of citizenship** to foreign workers highlights the principle aims of the guest worker model, which is to employ manpower for sustained growth without the need for integration – underscoring their temporary residence.¹⁶ These public-private sector divisions that exist between non-nationals and the Emiratis also tend to sustain and reflect **the deep-seated “structural” racism that exists**.¹⁷

Importantly, labour maltreatment is itself underpinned by the economic strategy adopted by the Gulf States. The exponential growth and wealth creation that have characterised the economic trajectories of these countries are the result of attracting **docile and apolitical labour which is imported during times of boom and quickly abandoned in recession**. As such social costs and human casualties are ignored in the ‘technocratic management of things’.¹⁸ The flow of migrant workers does not only offer the benefits of a docile workforce, but is presented as a **convenient demographic and cultural threat underpinning state-citizen bonds in the UAE**. Chalcraft¹⁹ refers to the tactical ploy of the ruling leaders to foster a distinctive set of Arab values and traditions confined to the national population - ensuring social fragmentation and rivalries between the two groups.

External influences and the role of international players

While the UAE has not signed up to the Migrant Workers Convention, it is a **signatory to the ILO’s Convention on the Abolition of Forced Labour, which makes it illegal to force work on migrants and to confiscate passports**. Thus the UAE is in violation of its own agreement of human rights standards.

There is also an onus on the international community to ensure that the practices in the UAE do not undermine the goals of the **UN's Millennium Development Goals**.²⁰ These include:

- **The eradication of hunger and poverty** (for migrants not receiving timely payment or wages too low for basic subsistence and to support family members elsewhere)
- **Gender equality and the empowerment of women** (in reference to those victims forced into sexual slavery, or those domestic workers suffering sexual abuse)

There have been some key improvements in labour conditions in the recent period and this has largely been due to external pressure.

In particular, the **14-point plan devised by New York University** required a minimal list of provisions for construction workers building its offshoot campus on Saadiyat Island, following a damning review of the labour exploitations by HRW.²¹ Likewise the **artists' petition** that followed the aforementioned report called for the **boycotting of the Guggenheim Museum project** on the island.²² Some artists have refused to showcase their works without the guarantee that workers are treated in fair and humane ways.

In the view of this external pressure, the UAE has tried to rectify its bleak labour record by promising better worker conditions, such as payment guarantees, better housing and regular breaks/holidays. A follow up by the HRW in 2012 recognised some labour reform, noting an improved **monitoring of wage payments and the establishment of health insurance schemes**. Yet it was also clear that human right violations still occurred i.e. the confiscation of passports, worker debts and frequent violations of contractual agreements.

Future trends – brief points for consideration

With the International Energy Agency, **lowering its forecast of global demand growth by 20% for 2013 and oil consumption** for next year from 1 million to 0.8 million barrels a day²³, this could have rippling effects within the Gulf region.

The **Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations has estimated that GCC import dependence will exceed 60 percent by 2010**.²⁴ As such, this also suggests that any future increases in food prices could lead to further labour unrest, particularly if wages are not matched to those hikes in prices.

¹ ITUC report: 'Hidden faces of the Gulf miracle' (2011), International Trade Union Congress, Brussels, Belgium. Available at:

http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/VS_QatarEN_final.pdf

² Sonmez, S.; Apostolopoulos, Y.; Tran, D.; Rentrop, S.. Human rights and health disparities for migrant workers in the UAE. **Health and Human Rights: An International Journal**, North America, 13 7 12 2011.

³ See endnote 1

⁴ See endnote 1

⁵ See endnote 2

⁶ HRW: World Report 2012: United Arab Emirates. Human Rights Watch, New York, NY 10118-3299 USA. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-united-arab-emirates>

⁷ HRW: UAE: Exploited Workers Building 'Island of Happiness' (2009). Human Rights Watch, New York, NY 10118-3299 USA. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2009/05/18/uae-exploited-workers-building-island-happiness>

⁸ The Guardian: 'Dubai's skyscrapers, stained by the blood of migrant workers' (2011). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/27/dubai-migrant-worker-deaths>

⁹ See endnote 1

¹⁰ UAE Ministry of Economy: Annual Report 2011, Abu Dhabi (HQ) UAE. Available at: <http://www.economy.ae/English/Documents/EconomicAnnualReport-en.pdf>

¹¹ See endnote 10

¹² WHO, Health of migrants — the way forward. Madrid, Spain: World Health Organization (2010). Available at http://www.who.int/hac/events/consultation_report_health_migrants_colour_web.pdf.

¹³ See endnote 7

¹⁴ See endnote 18

¹⁵ Ulrichsen, K, C: Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era. Hurst and Company, London (2011).

¹⁶ Suter, B: Labour Migration in the United Arab Emirates Field Study on Regular and Irregular Migration in Dubai. IMER Malm^ University, Sweden (2004-05) Available at: <http://dspace.mah.se/bitstream/handle/2043/3161/Labour%20Migration%20in%20the%20United%20Arab%20Emirates%20-%20A%20Field%20Study%20on%20Regular%20and%20Irregular%20Migration%20in%20Dubai.pdf?sequence=1>

¹⁷ Chalcraft, John (2011) Migration politics in the Arabian Peninsula. In: Held, David and Ulrichsen, Kristian, (eds.) The transformation of the Gulf: politics, economics and the global order. Routledge, Abingdon, UK. ISBN 9780415574518

¹⁸ See endnote 12

¹⁹ See endnote 12

²⁰ UNDP, Millennium development goals. United Nations Development Program (2010, 3/23). Available at <http://www.undp.org/mdg>.

²¹ New York University Abu Dhabi Compliance Report (2011). Commissioned by NYU. Available at: <http://nyuad.nyu.edu/pdfs/NYUAD.Compliance.Report.2011.pdf>

²² WNYC Culture Producer: Artists Boycott Abu Dhabi Guggenheim Over Migrant Workers' Rights (2011). Available at: <http://culture.wnyc.org/articles/features/2011/mar/19/artists-boycott-abu-dhabi-guggenheim-migrant-workers-rights/>

²³ The Wall Street Journal: 'Oil Futures: Nymex Crude Stumbles From Midweek Highs on Lower Demand Forecast' (August 10, 2012). Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/BT-CO-20120810-712240.html> (also for a full review IEA's report consult: <http://omrpublic.iea.org/currentissues/full.pdf>)

²⁴ See endnote 10.