**FIFA's Qatar test**

05 Feb 2014 | 16:35-Les Murray

Save the date. The big day of reckoning for Qatar and its troubled plans to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup comes on 12 February.

It is on that day the deadline arrives for the Qatari World Cup organisers to respond to FIFA’s call to [submit a report explaining what measures the Gulf emirate will take to improve the appalling conditions of its migrant workers](http://www.insideworldfootball.com/world-cup/62-qatar/14035-fifa-sets-date-for-qatar-to-report-on-workers-rights-progress).

A day later, 13 February, the European Parliament conducts a hearing into the plight of the migrant workers. FIFA president Sepp Blatter will be at the hearing.

The statement by FIFA on issuing the deadline, in which Blatter calls the conditions of the workers 'unacceptable', was a rare good story to emerge from its much maligned offices.

But FIFA and its top brass stop short of saying what the governing body will do in the event that the pledges sought from the Qataris are not forthcoming or are not satisfactory.

In my view, in that event, the World Cup hosting rights should be immediately taken away from Qatar and the bidding to host the event re-opened.

There have been many questions raised since Qatar won its bid in 2010, including the country’s unbearable summer heat and the scent of corruption on how it got the 13 votes on the FIFA executive committee, outbidding the United States, Japan, Korea Republic and Australia.

But the most powerful and compelling commentary on whether or not Qatar is fit to hold the world’s grandest sporting event is the appalling plight of its migrant workers who are fated to work on the infrastructure projects being built to deliver the World Cup.

According to an investigation conducted by London’s *The Guardian* newspaper, published last September:

:: Qatar’s construction frenzy ahead of the 2022 World Cup, on which the spend will be $114 billion, is on course to cost the lives of at least 4,000 migrant workers.

:: The annual death toll among construction workers could rise to 600 per year.

:: 44 Nepalese migrant workers died between June and August last year on construction sites, either from heart failure or workplace accidents.

:: Workers are forced to labour in 50c heat.

:: Workers’ salaries are withheld for months at a time and their passports not returned to them by employers who 'sponsor' them under the dreaded kafala system.

:: Workers are denied free drinking water, even in the searing summer heat.

:: Workers are made to live in overcrowded and insanitary conditions.

:: More than 700 Indian migrant workers died in Qatar between 2010 and 2012.

Subsequent to the investigation by *The Guardian*, Amnesty International released its own 170-page report on the misery of Qatar’s migrant workers, cataloguing the scale of abuse, including:

:: Workers arriving in Qatar to find that the terms and conditions of their work are different to those they had been promised during the recruitment process – including salaries being lower than promised.

:: Workers having their pay withheld for months, or not being paid at all; employers leaving workers "undocumented" and therefore at risk of being detained by the authorities.

:: Migrant workers having their passports confiscated and being prevented from leaving the country by their employers; workers being made to work excessive (sometimes extreme) hours and employers failing to protect workers’ health and safety adequately; and workers being housed in squalid accommodation.

It’s clear. What is happening in Qatar is tantamount to slavery and a pretty grubby form of slavery at that, if there was such a thing as degrees of slavery.

And it’s happening at a broader level beyond the borders of Qatar in the region. The kafala system is widespread across the Gulf states and is especially abhorrent in Saudi Arabia. Bahrain claims to have abolished it but reports suggest that it has not been enforced and migrant workers continue to be exploited and abused.

The champion of the international drive to improve the wretched lot of the migrant workers in Qatar is an Australian, Sharan Burrow, the general secretary of the Brussels-based International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC), a former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

This woman has balls, recently dressing down the Qataris in Doha over the conditions of the migrant workers which, I gather, did not go down well with a bunch of royal Muslim men.

This matter now poses as FIFA’s biggest moral test in recent times.

FIFA is not only football’s global governor. It is also its ultimate protector and the body erected to safeguard football’s moral virtues.

FIFA’s mission statement reads: 'Develop the game, touch the world, build a better future'.

In its statutes, FIFA says: "The world is a place rich in natural beauty and cultural diversity, but also one where many are still deprived of their basic rights. FIFA now has an even greater responsibility to reach out and touch the world, using football as a symbol of hope and integration."

So how does this sit with FIFA’s showpiece event, the World Cup, being hosted by Qatar, a monarchic, financially bloated dictatorship, which abuses and exploits its immigrant workers with despicable disdain for their basic human rights?

This is FIFA’s big test if it wants to grab the chance to demonstrate that, in the face of suggestions to the utter contrary, it actually has morals, ethics, principles and a backbone.

Either the state of Qatar repeals and does away with its grimy migrant worker system, the kafala, and turns its employment apparatus on its head, or it loses the World Cup.

And in future, bidding rules for aspiring World Cup hosts should provide that candidate nations must be of minimal standards of freedom, democracy and human decency. Qatar is clearly not a fit country to host the FIFA World Cup.

Football, the beautiful game, can no longer afford to be associated with slime, immorality and a disregard for basic human rights.

*\*Les Murray is a former member of the FIFA Ethics Committee.*