

# Revealed: How coronavirus outbreak shines light on violations inside Qatar's labor camps

Sun, 2020-04-05 22:51

DUBAI: For as long as he lived in Qatar, Antony, from Batticaloa in Sri Lanka, led a sort of double life.

By day, he was a cleaner at the gleaming offices of Qatar Foundation and Qatar National Convention Center in north Doha.

By night, he was a miserable occupant of a cramped room in a derelict building in the Industrial Area, a sprawling expanse of workers' accommodation, warehouses, vehicle-repair shops and factories, known locally as Sanaya.

Looking back, Antony can be excused for believing that it was destiny that brought him back to Sri Lanka a few months ago. Many of his former dormitory mates and co-workers now find themselves in a virtual prison, sealed off inside the Industrial Area by Qatari internal security following the coronavirus outbreak in the country.

Residents of Doha know there is only one way of describing what has been unfolding in the slumlike neighborhood: A man-made tragedy.

Qatar has been engaged in a damage-control exercise since March 11, when it enforced a strict lockdown of the Industrial Area after the Ministry of Public Health said that 238 new cases had been discovered among people "who reside in one residential complex."



Migrant workers, on whom Qatar is heavily reliant, are bearing the brunt of a coronavirus outbreak. (AFP)

Still, scrutiny of Qatar's treatment of migrant workers has intensified. In an open letter to Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz, Qatar's prime minister, on March 31, 16 nongovernmental organizations and trade unions jointly called for adequate protection of the workforce. The coalition, which includes Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Migrant Rights.org, has asked Doha to supplement steps already taken with "further actions that protect public health and are consistent with fundamental human rights, including the principle of non-discrimination." It said: "Qatari authorities should, among other recommendations, ensure that all migrant workers, including undocumented workers, quarantined or otherwise, have access to testing and get appropriate medical treatment." Until February, the world had heard little about what Qatari authorities described euphemistically as "one residential complex" – an overcrowded shantytown in which most of Qatar's workforce is housed. The abject squalor of the Industrial Area has long been an open secret in the wealthy, gas-rich country, but its remote location meant it was safely out of the sight of journalists on all-expenses-paid Qatar tours and visiting officials of international organizations.

Now, with possibly thousands of workers infected with the coronavirus and the entire district under strict lockdown, the public-health crisis has become yet another blot on Qatar's reputation – and a stain on the Arab world's collective conscience. A diplomatic source said: "The situation (as of Friday) is under control, but

not entirely. There are serious restrictions on workers' movement."

A March 20 report in the UK's Guardian newspaper said: "No one can enter or leave, say workers who live in the area. Inside the quarantined camps, workers describe an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty."

Citing sources inside the Industrial Area, the newspaper said that some workers were being put on unpaid leave until further notice, with only food and accommodation covered.

"The situation is getting worse each day. Workers from camp 1 to camp 32 are in lockdown. My friends who live there are in extreme panic," one worker from Bangladesh told the Guardian.

The AFP news agency quoted a Pakistani resident, who was beginning a second week under mandatory quarantine, as saying: "We've been in lockdown for the last eight to 10 days, and we don't know when it will end.

"The basic issue we are facing now is groceries. The government is providing us with food, but only after some days – and little things only."

There are an estimated 2 million migrant workers in Qatar, mostly from South Asia and East Africa. They account for 95 percent of the country's working population.

This segment of the population has swelled in recent years as the Gulf state pumps billions of dollars into the construction sector as the host of the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

Human-rights organizations have repeatedly criticized labor practices in Qatar, particularly since it began importing armies of impoverished workers to build a new rapid transit system and a string of football stadiums among other trophy projects.

Except for the few months of the year when the weather in the country is bearable, these laborers have been toiling away day and night at different project sites, most located miles from their grim bedroom community – the Industrial Area.

For a long time, the entire neighborhood resembled the set of "District 9," a 2009 film about a fictional internment camp in South Africa in which a population of sick and malnourished aliens is forced to live in pathetic conditions on Earth.

It was obvious that the rulers of Qatar had no shortage of funds when it came to investing in high-return diplomatic initiatives, bidding for prestigious sports events, or bankrolling fellow Islamists across the Middle East.

Yet, when it came to its own backyard, namely its wretched labor camps, there seemed inexplicably to be insufficient gas wealth to make these sites merely inhabitable.

## Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

In recent years, the approach roads to the Industrial Area have become more navigable with the completion of a number of highways among other infrastructure projects. But such improvements have made little difference to the lives of the construction workers themselves.



The streets have potholes so large that motorists can be excused for thinking they are not in the world's richest country on a per capita basis, but in a strange, benighted land.

Streets are lined with shabby dormitories, where laborers live often crammed 10 to a room, and sharing kitchens and toilets in unsanitary conditions. Practices such as "social distancing" and self-isolating – essential precautions to prevent the spread of any infectious disease – are impossible in such surroundings.

Street lighting is so inadequate and the dust stirred up by passing vehicles so thick that venturing into the Industrial Area at night has never been for the faint of heart, especially if the visitor is from one of Doha's upmarket neighborhoods just a few miles away – West Bay, Lusail or Pearl Qatar, the artificial island.

Even before the new coronavirus appeared as a menace to the Industrial Area's residents, unnatural death was far from a rare occurrence, especially during the Gulf state's long, hot summer.



Migrant workers, on whom Qatar is heavily reliant, are bearing the brunt of a coronavirus outbreak. (AFP)

Hundreds of thousands of laborers have been exposed to potentially fatal levels of heat stress while working in temperatures of up to 45 C for up to 10 hours a day.

Since high temperatures have an adverse effect on the cardiovascular system, medical experts believe there is a direct correlation between the abnormally high fatality rates among workers and heat stress in the summer months. Data from the Indian government showed that 1,678 of its citizens died in Qatar between 2012 and August 2018.

Between 2012 and 2017, at least 1,025 Nepalis died in Qatar from cardiac arrest, respiratory failure and “sickness” among other causes. According to reports, in most cases no autopsies were performed on the bodies of migrant workers, whose deaths were attributed to cardiovascular or “natural” causes.

Paradoxically, for all the international scrutiny that the Industrial Area’s coronavirus outbreak is drawing, repercussions of the global pandemic could leave Qatar’s migrant workers even more vulnerable in the coming days. According to International Labor Organization estimates, the predicted economic and labor crisis could increase unemployment worldwide by almost 25 million.

For Antony, the one-time Industrial Area resident, returning to Sri Lanka had been a wrenching decision given the limited job prospects for an unskilled worker. But with the benefit of hindsight, he has absolutely no regrets.



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As world locks down, Qatari construction presses ahead  
Coronavirus hits migrant workers in Qatar



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## [Ex-head of Libya's anti-Qaddafi revolt dies of coronavirus](#)

Author:

AFP

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1586101616671824500

Sun, 2020-04-05 14:56

TRIPOLI: Mahmud Jibril, the former head of the rebel government that overthrew Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, died Sunday of the coronavirus, his party said.

Jibril, 68, died in Cairo where he had been hospitalized for two weeks, said Khaled Al-Mrimi, secretary of the Alliance of National Forces party founded by Jibril in 2012.



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UN warns Libya vulnerable as country suffers first virus death  
New coronavirus cases confirmed in Libya as fighting flares

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# Jerusalem's Palm Sunday march scaled back due to coronavirus

Author:

By MOSHE EDRI | AP

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1586090523131005800

Sun, 2020-04-05 12:07

JERUSALEM: A small group of Franciscan monks and Roman Catholic faithful took to the streets of Jerusalem's Christian Quarter in the Old City Sunday to distribute olive branches after the traditional Palm Sunday procession was canceled due to restrictions imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus. The march took place as Israel deployed troops to help contain an outbreak in a hard-hit city. Iran, dealing with the worst outbreak in the Mideast, announced plans to allow some businesses to reopen later this month even as the death toll continued to climb. Lebanon, meanwhile, reopened its airport to allow citizens who had been stranded overseas to return home.

Palm Sunday celebrations start the Holy Week leading up to Easter. Worshipers traditionally carry palm fronds and olive branches and march from the top of the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem's Old City.

While thousands of pilgrims usually participate in the march, this year was limited to a handful of participants. Clerics and faithful went door to door often throwing the branches to Christians looking on from their balconies.

"This year because of the new situation we are trying to come to all the Christians in our Christian Quarter to bring these branches of olives, the sign of new hope," said the Rev. Sandro Tomasevic, a Catholic clergyman at the Latin Parish of Jerusalem.

Palm Sunday commemorates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and is the start of the church's most solemn week, which includes the Good Friday re-enactment of Jesus' crucifixion and death and his resurrection on Easter.

In Israel, more than 8,000 people have contracted the coronavirus and 46 have died. In the West Bank, nearly 200 cases have been reported, including a large outbreak in the biblical town of Bethlehem.

The outbreak has forced church officials to close churches to the public and scale back religious observances throughout the week. Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land, held a small, closed service at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site where Christians believe Jesus was crucified and resurrected.

The coronavirus causes mild to moderate symptoms in most patients, who recover within a few weeks. But it is highly contagious and can be spread by people showing no symptoms. It can cause serious illness and death in some patients, particularly the elderly and those with underlying health issues. Iran has been the hardest-hit nation across the region. Iran state TV reported that an additional 151 people had died, pushing the death toll to 3,603 with over 58,000 confirmed cases.

But the country's president, Hassan Rouhani, announced that low-risk

businesses will be allowed to resume their activities in Tehran on April 18. Businesses in other provinces will begin a week earlier, on April 11, he said during a meeting Saturday. He said government offices would also be able to boost staffing, from one-third to two-thirds of their work force, beginning April 11.

Rouhani said the decision would not contradict a stay-at-home policy and that businesses must still observe health restrictions ordered by the government. High-risk businesses, like pools, gyms and shopping malls will remain closed, he said.

In Lebanon, meanwhile, a jet carrying more than 70 Lebanese citizens who had been stuck in Saudi Arabia after Beirut's international airport closed nearly three weeks arrived in Lebanon. It marked the beginning of flights that aim to return thousands of Lebanese from around the world. Three more flights are scheduled to arrive later Sunday from the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and Ivory Coast.

The tiny Mediterranean country has reported 520 cases of coronavirus and 20 deaths since the first case was reported in late February.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab said up to 21,000 people have registered to return home, and the process will take several weeks.

In Israel, the military began an operation in the hard-hit city of Bnei Brak, helping to distribute food and medicine. The government last week put Bnei Brak, home to a large population of ultra-Orthodox religious Jews, under a near closure after an outbreak ravaged the city. Israel's ultra-Orthodox population has been disproportionately infected after religious leaders played down or ignored warnings to maintain social distance early in the crisis. Meanwhile, a nursing home in the southern city of Beersheba reported its sixth death in recent days.





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Israel arrests Palestinian official in east Jerusalem  
Jerusalem hospitals need \$7 million to deal with coronavirus emergency

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## [UAE factories to meet needs of the health sector amid coronavirus](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-04-05 15:45

DUBAI: The UAE cabinet has ordered factories to meet the needs of the health sector, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum said in a tweet.

The cabinet held its second virtual meeting where it issued a set of decisions directing authorities to exempt people from residency fines until the end of the year; strengthening the state's strategic reserves and ordering factories to support the needs of the health sector.

عقدنا اليوم اجتماعنا الثاني لمجلس الوزراء عن بعد .. أقررنا خلاله مجموعة من القرارات والتسهيلات ... بالإضافة لتوجيه الجهات باعفاء أصحاب الإقامات من الغرامات حتى نهاية العام ... وتعزيز المخزون الاستراتيجي للدولة .. وتوجيه المصانع بدعم احتياجات القطاع الصحي في الدولة  
[pic.twitter.com/FlmnqQGrp9](https://pic.twitter.com/FlmnqQGrp9)

– HH Sheikh Mohammed (@HSHkMohd) [April 5, 2020](#)

Sheikh Mohammed was also briefed on the new precautionary measures being taken by the government.

UAE's health ministry reported on Saturday 241 new coronavirus cases in the country, an increase that the ministry said was due to its proactive testing.

The ministry also confirmed one new death, bringing the total to 10 and the overall number of cases to 1,505.



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UAE records 241 new coronavirus cases, one new death  
UAE officially asks to postpone Expo 2020 Dubai

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## [Tunisia government given special powers to handle coronavirus crisis](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1586025208266661600

Sat, 2020-04-04 17:19

TUNIS: Tunisia's parliament on Saturday ceded some powers to the North African country's government for two months to help it handle the coronavirus crisis and the expected economic fallout.

The decision, backed by all political parties, will allow Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh's government to issue decrees, strike purchasing agreements and seek finance without consulting parliament.

Tunisia has 495 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, including 18 deaths, and

has imposed a national lockdown until April 19 to slow its spread. Fakhfakh, who was confirmed as prime minister on Feb. 28 after months of wrangling between rival parties to form a government, said the move was a “necessary weapon” to allow fast decisions to tackle the crisis. His government has announced a financial package that includes aid for the poor as well as tax and loan repayment holidays. Fakhfakh has said the government may impose exceptional taxes on companies to cover this if the government cannot find the money elsewhere. Tunisia, which embraced democracy after a 2011 uprising to overthrow veteran autocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, has struggled to develop its economy over the past decade. An International Monetary Fund loan program expires this month and Finance minister Nizar Yaich told Reuters in March the government had started negotiations with IMF on a new agreement.



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Tunisia offers free helpline as lockdown sees abuse spike  
Tunisia releases 1,420 prisoners over coronavirus