

# Desert heat: World Cup hosts Qatar face scrutiny over 'slavery' accusations

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By James Montague

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CNN) -- Zahir Belounis has spent the best part of the last two years without wages, a club or any prospect of returning home but the French Algerian footballer now faces his immediate future without the most basic of commodities.

Food.

"I will stop food, a hunger strike, I want to do that," explained the 33-year-old striker.

"It's going to start next week. They treat me like a dog but I will fight. I will die here in Qatar," he said in an interview with CNN last week.

Belounis, who had played in the lower reaches of French football, now plays for the Qatari first division club El Jaish, the army club.

Or at least, he claims, he should be.

Despite, he alleges, holding a contract that lasts until 2015 he claims to have been frozen out, threatened, moved to other clubs against his will, gone unpaid and finally barred from leaving the country, leaving him, his wife and two young daughters trapped in Qatar.

A hunger strike, Belounis says, is his final throw of the dice.

"I will stop the food and sit there [in front of the Qatar Football Association office] and bring some documents until some important people listen to me," he said.

"I have enough evidence. I don't speak bad about Qatar. But there are people here who are not honest. I have two daughters to take care of. No one cares I have been without salary for 23 months."

Belounis is arguably one of the most high profile cases to emerge regarding employee rights in Qatar -- reportedly its Labour Ministry received thousands of complaints last year.

When CNN contacted the Qatar Stars League and the Qatari Football Association, presenting them with Belounis' allegations, the QFA said: "All parties are analyzing in depth the matter and action for defamation is being taken." They declined to respond to any specific allegations made by Belounis.

### Kafala system

Since Qatar was awarded the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup finals, the tiny emirate of less than two million people, and barely 300,000 citizens, found next to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain -- has presented a glowing portrait of itself to the rest of the world.

Its royal family, led by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, is one of the richest in the world thanks to the discovery and exploitation of one of the largest natural gas fields on earth in the late 1990s.

It has lavished money on European football too. The Qatar Foundation, funded by the same gas wealth, sponsors the shirts of Barcelona FC.

Another Spanish club, Malaga, reached the quarter finals of this year's UEFA Champions League largely thanks to a huge injection of Qatari funds.

And the Qatar Investment Authority, one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, bought Paris Saint-Germain, signing some of the game's greatest players as they march towards the French league title. The wages for the likes of David Beckham and Zlatan Ibrahimovic have been lavish.

Yet according to Belounis, as well as several human rights groups, several players and thousands of construction workers who will be building the infrastructure for the World Cup have been abused, denied their wages and trapped in a system that they cannot escape from.

The so called Kafala system -- which ties employees to a specific employer - - has, according to Human Rights Watch and the International Trade Union Confederation, been open to systematic abuse and created a de facto form of slavery for the more than one million migrant workers living within its borders.

"Qatar has been quite successful at giving off a progressive image when, in fact, the [labor] system is exploitative," said Nicholas McGeehan of Human Rights Watch.

"It is the same old story. The Kafala system, the confiscation of passports, the illegal charging of exorbitant agent fees, the inability for workers to access the courts for redress.

"Qatar has an exit visa system so you cannot leave the country without the sponsor's say. You have a system where workers are trapped in the country and the same old abuses rear their head. Unpaid wages, wages held in arrears. It keeps workers credibly vulnerable," he added.

The system has prompted one international labor organization to call for FIFA to strip Qatar of the 2022 World Cup over the treatment of its migrant workers.

The vast majority hail from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, working long hours for little pay in the construction industry. On site temperatures can reach 50 degrees in the summer.

"I was shocked to see this exploitation in football," explained Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.

"In late 2010 we conducted a risk assessment looking at basic fundamental labor rights. The Gulf region stood out like a red light. They were absolutely at the bottom end for rights for workers. They were fundamentally slave states."

The ITUC had been in talks with FIFA and the Qatari authorities, pressing for reform.

As Burrow points out, it will be migrant workers who build the multi-billion dollar 2022 World Cup project; the transport infrastructure, the hotels and the 12 state of the art stadiums. It is estimated that as many as one million extra workers will be flown in.

"It went nowhere," Burrow said of the discussions.

"They refused to give us freedom of association. I went there to the Qatari labor camps every week holding meetings. The conditions in the camps were squalid. No personal space, the cooking facilities were unsafe.

"These men are basically slaves there. The legal system doesn't work, their contracts are torn up at a whim. These men are very angry. They feel like their lives are being taken away.

"In the meantime we had no choice but to put it back on FIFA," Burrow added.

"If two years on [since the award of the 2022 World Cup] the [Qatari] government has not done the fundamentals, they have no commitment to human rights."

On the issue of migrant worker rights during the construction of projects related to the World Cup, and the call by the ITUC for FIFA to strip Qatar of the tournament, the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee said in a statement to CNN: "The safety, security, health and dignity of workers -- be they professionals or construction workers -- is of paramount importance.

"Our commitment is to change working conditions in order to ensure a lasting legacy of improved worker welfare. We are aware this cannot be done overnight. But the 2022 FIFA World Cup is acting as a catalyst for improvements in this regard."

They point to the Migrant Workers Welfare Charter that the government enacted last October, which pledges that all 2022 World Cup contractors and sub-contractors will be held accountable to strict standards of health and safety, equal treatment and safe and healthy living conditions.

There is also a promise to "ensure that wages are paid to workers on time".

"We have always acknowledged that the current state of workers welfare needs to be improved," the statement continued.

"From the very beginning we have pointed to the power of football as a tremendous catalyst for tangibly improving labor conditions in Qatar and the region at large.

"We opened a dialogue with Human Rights Watch and the ITUC in the latter stages of 2012, agreeing to work together in developing language for our workers' charter and contractual provisions relating to labor ... To commence this dialogue and then for ITUC to launch a campaign calling for the reopening of the vote is in our view highly disingenuous and leads us to question ITUC's intentions."

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To build on the worker's welfare charter, the Qatar Foundation last week announced that it would enforce mandatory standards of migrant workers welfare to "help apply minimum requirements with respect to the recruitment, living and working conditions, as well as the general treatment of workers engaged in construction and other projects."

In a statement to CNN, FIFA maintained that the "World Cup in the Middle East offers a great opportunity for the region to discover football's power as a platform for positive social change. FIFA upholds the respect for human rights and the application of international norms of behavior as a principle and part of all our activities."

Football's global governing body also pointed out it had held meetings with both the ITUC and Human Rights Watch.

"FIFA expects the dialogue that started with both the Qatari authorities and organizations like HRW to continue in the build-up of the 2022 FIFA World Cup," the statement said.

"FIFA will continue as part of our social responsibility strategy to address opportunities to increase the positive and reduce the negative impacts of the FIFA World Cup towards 2022."

The Qatari government has intimated that it is prepared to scrap the Kafala system of sponsorship. "The sponsorship system will be replaced with a contract signed by the two parties," Hussain Al Mulla, undersecretary for the Ministry of Labor, told local Arabic daily Al Arab in 2012. But as Human Rights Watch points out, no timetable has been set.

After repeated attempts by CNN to seek comment from the Ministry of Labor, Qatari officials declined to respond.

But it wasn't just construction workers trapped in the system. The ITUC's Burrow said he was shocked to discover that several footballers had befallen the same fate.

Belounis says that his problems began after he had become captain of El Jaish, then a second division club.

He led the team to promotion and was called up to the Qatari team for the 2011 Military World Cup in Brazil. He was given a passport, albeit temporarily so that he could compete. The team finished fourth, only losing to Brazil in the third place playoff thanks to a goal late in extra time.

When he returned home his Qatari passport was taken back, Belounis was told he was surplus to requirements at El Jaish and informed he had to play on loan for a different team. He didn't want to leave but agreed, he claims, after being promised he would still receive his wages as per his contract.

Belounis says that, for a while at least, his new club paid him a small fraction of what he was owed.

"But I have not seen a single euro from El Jaish," he complained.

Now he has no money and is surviving on handouts sent from his family in Paris --an irony given how much the Qatar royal family has pumped into PSG -- as well as being supported by the French community in Doha.

He plays for no club and has no prospect of playing for anyone else in Qatar.

"I wake up, I take care of my daughter, I try and stay like a man in front of my family," he said.

"My wife gets depressed. I've tried to be strong but it is very difficult. I go to gym and train on my own."

The issue is now in the Qatari courts meaning Belounis and his family cannot leave.

"They [the club] said: 'We will pay you, but you have to sign this paper that says we don't owe you anything.' I said: 'Give me first the cheque.' They said: 'Contract first.' They said they would not give me an exit visa unless I go to the court and stop the claim."

Qatar "has many interests in FIFA"

One player who did manage to leave the country was the French born Moroccan international Abdeslam Ouaddou.

The 34-year-old defender had played at the highest level in France for Nancy and in England for Fulham.

But when Ouaddou, who represented Morocco over 50 times, was released by Nancy in 2010, he was approached by newly promoted Qatari club Lekhwiya, the team owned by Qatar's crown prince Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani.

"I didn't have a lot of opportunities," admits Ouaddou of his time after being released.

"They were looking for an experienced player. I'd played in England, France, Greece, in the [UEFA] Champions League. They were ambitious and wanted to win the Asian Champions League. The idea was to finish in the top four in the Qatar Stars League [Qatar's top division]."

He signed a lucrative contract and experienced immediate success.

"We did a good job in my first year, finishing first," he said. "I was captain. The first year was great. The people and the board was happy. We were winning every game. And when you are winning you have no problems. It is beautiful," he added.

When Lekhwiya won the title, it was Ouaddou who was handed the shield first.

Having taken Lekhwiya further than even the club's ambitious management had planned, Ouaddou assumed he would be preparing for an assault on the Asian Champions League in his next season.

Instead he was told he would be moving to Qatar Sports Club instead. When a club official first told him he thought it was a joke.

"And then I saw his face," said Ouaddou.

"He said: 'It comes from the Prince and all that comes from the Prince is not subject to discussion'."

When Ouaddou's two-year contract was announced he presented a different face to the world.

"I'm more than pleased to have extended my stay in the Qatar Stars League and move to another big club," he told the Qatar Football Association's official website in August 2011. But Ouaddou claims that nothing could have been further from the truth.

"I said I didn't want to change clubs, I didn't want to play in Qatar Sports Club," he said.

"I realized I couldn't contest the will of the Crown Prince."

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Things didn't go well. He and the club had a bad season. When he returned to Qatar after his summer break in France he was told he was no longer needed. His wages were stopped and he was omitted from a pre-season tour of Spain.

When the team returned for its pre-season photograph he was made to stand on the side. He wasn't given a team shirt to wear, just a grey training top, accentuating his isolation. Eventually Ouaddou took his claim to FIFA.



"I waited after five months with no salary. I had to pay school fees and feed my children and buy clothes. I decided to break the contract and leave the country," he said.

"When I asked for my exit visa from my first club, my sponsor at Lekhwiya, he [a club official] told me: 'We will not give you an exit visa until you take out your complaint. Qatar has many interests in FIFA and it is not good!'"

It wasn't until he threatened to take his case to a human rights group, he claims, that he was eventually granted permission to leave. He was told: "We will let you leave the country but your complaint with FIFA will take maybe four to six years to get your money because we have a lot of influence and we are very powerful in FIFA," he recalled.

"When you work in Qatar you belong to someone. You are not free. You are a slave. Of course it is not the same situation as the [construction] workers in Qatar, but there is a parallel. It is the same methodology. They can throw you away like old socks."

Asked about Ouaddou's assertions, the Qatari Football Association, as it did with questions about the Belounis case, declined to respond to any specific allegations.

Ouaddou is now back in France, training with his old club Nancy and awaiting the result of FIFA's investigation.

"We can confirm that FIFA has opened proceedings about the case you refer to. However, please understand that we cannot comment any further as the investigations are on-going." said FIFA in a statement, adding it had received Ouaddou's claim in October.

Worldwide players union FIFPro said on its website: "You don't throw away a human being, as you might throw away an object that no longer serves its purpose. You do not make him suffer on purpose.

"FIFPro and players all over the world will be paying close attention to decisions taken by FIFA during the case that Abdelem [sic] Ouaddou has brought before the international federation.

For all the talk on both sides of the issue, on the ground Belounis is still trapped without a solution, a situation that is so bad he is now preparing for a hunger strike.

"My life now is a disaster," he said. "Who can help me?" Ouaddou has managed to leave, but his battle continues and the experience has left a bitter taste.

"When I saw on TV that they [FIFA] gave Qatar the World Cup I said it was maybe a good thing because football belongs to the world, football has no borders." he said.

"After two years living in that country my thinking has changed. I am a man who respects human rights and in this country, I can tell you, they are walking on human beings.

"A country that doesn't respect human beings does not deserve the right to organize the best competition in the world."