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Attn:
Mr Gianni Infantino
President of FIFA
FIFA Headquarters
FIFA-Strasse 20
P.O. Box 8044
Zurich, Switzerland

6th December 2024

O/R: 896/2024/GS/AK

Dear President Infantino,

RE: A Call on FIFA to Do More to Ensure That the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Respects (African) Migrant Workers' Human and Labour Rights

On behalf of the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa: <https://www.ituc-africa.org/>) with its 18 million registered members across 52 African countries, I write to express profound concern regarding Saudi Arabia's bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. The bid, led by the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, appears to be the sole bid with significant backing, as reflected in FIFA's recently concluded report on Saudi Arabia's human rights record. Its approval has all but confirmed Saudi Arabia as the host of the 2034 tournament.

We are deeply troubled by this report, conducted by FIFA General Secretary Mattias Grafstrom, which awarded Saudi Arabia a 4.2 out of 5 rating. FIFA disclaimed that the rating is not based on Saudi Arabia's "general human rights context" but on how it would "address human rights records connected with a tournament". While the report mentions measures to ensure a rights-based tournament - including labour rights for migrant workers, children's rights, gender rights, disability rights and press freedom - ITUC-Africa must highlight Saudi Arabia's alarming track record on human and labour rights, particularly concerning African migrant workers.

We are especially alarmed as FIFA's report did not include the participation of critical entities such as our continental organisation. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly claimed to be reforming its industrial relations frameworks. However, in practice, the laws and conditions have not improved and are, in fact, deteriorating.

Mr President, with all due respect, we must state that the FIFA report, which gives Saudi Arabia a favourable assessment with an unfounded optimism about its readiness to reform, is deeply misleading. The report appears to be more of an exercise in self-praise than an objective self-appraisal.

ITUC-Africa previously addressed this matter in a letter dated 15 October 2024 to Mr Patrice Motsepe, President of the Confederation of African Football (CAF). We raised our concerns regarding the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's treatment of migrant workers, highlighting systemic racism and gross violations of rights. Regrettably, no response was received. This silence compels us to escalate these concerns directly to FIFA.

As you may know, Saudi Arabia has faced extensive criticism for its treatment of migrant workers, who are often subjected to exploitation and abuse. Violations include forced labour, confiscation of passports, excessively long working hours without rest, physical and verbal abuse and restrictions on movement and communication. Such practices blatantly contravene international labour standards, including ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, which Saudi Arabia has ratified. According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index by Walk Free, Saudi Arabia has a high prevalence of modern slavery, perpetuated by systemic discrimination and exploitative labour practices.

The Kingdom continues to enforce the notorious kafala system, which ties workers to employers and grants employers disproportionate control over workers' legal and employment statuses. While some reforms have been announced, the system remains a tool for abuse, enabling forced labour and other grave violations. The kafala system institutionalises modern slavery and leaves African migrant workers particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

In Saudi Arabia, African migrant workers are subjected to extreme discrimination, including hate speech and racist treatment. Women workers face the added burden of sexual harassment and violence. Workers who protest mistreatment face dire consequences. A harrowing example is the case of an African worker who, after demanding overdue wages, was reportedly burnt alive. A social media post by Larry Madowo, CNN's Africa correspondent, recently corroborated such abuses.

These accounts are not baseless allegations. Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record is widely known, as evidenced by high-profile incidents like the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the public flogging of women seeking the right to drive. ITUC-Africa has conducted extensive research into these issues and collected testimonies from affected workers. Below are five anonymised accounts to illustrate the severity of the situation:

Worker Y (Ethiopian): *"I arrived in Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic helper. My passport was confiscated upon arrival and I was forced to work long hours without pay for six months. Attempts to leave were met with threats of deportation."*

Worker T (Kenyan): *"I worked 18-hour days and was locked in the house when my employer was away. I was physically assaulted for asking for wages and my living quarters were a windowless basement room."*

Worker C (Eritrean): *"I was hired as a cook but was made to work long hours as a general labourer without pay. I was denied medical treatment for injuries sustained at work."*

Worker R (Somali): *"I was treated like a prisoner, with my passport confiscated and no freedom of movement. The constant fear and isolation severely impacted my mental health."*

Worker Z (Nigerian): *"Promised a job as a driver, I ended up working in physically demanding conditions without proper food or rest. My employer's threats kept me compliant."*

These testimonies are only a fraction of the countless abuses suffered by African workers. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's disregard for the fundamental rights of these workers is a stain on humanity.

FIFA cannot shirk its responsibility to uphold the principles of fairness and human rights. Article D of FIFA's bidding principles explicitly requires respect for internationally recognised human rights in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. For emphasis, we are quoting Principle D as a key principle for the bidding processes:

"d) Commitment to Human Rights and Sustainable Event Management: FIFA is fully committed to conducting its activities in connection with the bidding for and hosting of the final

competitions of the FIFA World Cup 2030 and the FIFA World Cup 2034 in accordance with sustainable event management standards and practices (in line with ISO 20121), safeguarding principles for the protection of children and adults at risk and respecting internationally recognised human rights in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.”

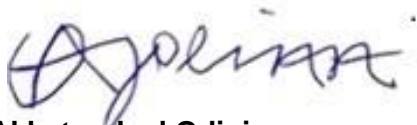
By turning a blind eye to the Kingdom’s labour abuses, FIFA sends a chilling message: that the exploitation of African workers is acceptable as long as it serves FIFA’s financial interests. This betrayal of trust tarnishes FIFA’s reputation and the integrity of the World Cup. To address this, ITUC-Africa strongly urges FIFA to take the following actions:

1. Demand comprehensive labour reforms in Saudi Arabia, including abolishing the kafala system.
2. Enforce labour laws ensuring fair wages, reasonable working hours and safe conditions.
3. Establish an independent monitoring body to oversee workers’ conditions in World Cup preparations.
4. Advocate for mechanisms enabling workers to associate freely and report abuses without fear.
5. Make human rights commitments a core requirement for hosting the World Cup.
6. Require regular progress reports from Saudi Arabia on labour reforms and human rights improvements.

Mr Infantino, the privilege of hosting the World Cup must not come at the expense of human dignity. FIFA has a moral obligation to stand with the millions of workers who have been silenced and oppressed. The time for empty promises and glossy reports is over. It is time for action.

ITUC-Africa will not rest until the rights and dignity of African workers are respected. We will mobilise global solidarity across the labour movement to amplify this call for justice. FIFA must decide whether it stands with those who uphold rights, fairness and equality or with those who exploit and oppress.

Yours sincerely,



Akhator Joel Odigie
ITUC-Africa General Secretary