**Response to Call for Input: “Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of mitigation, adaptation, and financial actions to address climate change, with particular emphasis on loss and damage”**

[Migrant-Rights.org](https://www.migrant-rights.org/) is a GCC-based advocacy platform working to advance the rights of migrant workers. It aims to change perspectives towards migrant workers by improving access to information on migration in the Gulf region and its migration corridors and promoting informed, local discussion on migration issues. Both off and online, Migrant-Rights.org engages residents, local businesses, and employers to challenge perspectives towards migrants and improve conditions for the region’s most vulnerable workers.

Contact: info@migrant-rights.org

The international community has recognized the specific vulnerabilities of migrants in the context of climate change, the need to incorporate the rights of migrants in all climate-related actions, and the need to empower migrants’ participation in these actions ([A/74/161](https://undocs.org/A/74/161)). Much of the focus on migrants affected by climate change has centered on those who have been or may be forced to migrate due to environmental stress in low-developed countries. However, there is also a pressing need to address the impact of climate change on low-income migrant workers in highly developed destination countries that are already experiencing the effects of warming temperatures.

The Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC) comprises some of the hottest countries in the world. More than half of the most extreme temperature and humidity readings recorded on land have occurred in the region.[[1]](#endnote-1) The survivability of wet-bulb temperatures[[2]](#endnote-2) is close to 35 Celsius for six hours, and much lower temperatures will still have serious health impacts.[[3]](#endnote-3) Extreme summer heat temperatures are projected to increase, particularly in urban centers and mega cities, if the ‘business as usual’ approach to climate change continues. [[4]](#endnote-4)

These high-income countries are often considered relatively less vulnerable to climate-related damages due to the lack of climate-dependent economic structures (such as agriculture) and adaptive infrastructure (such as wide-spread air-conditioning). However, the region’s low-income migrant workers absorb these vulnerabilities, and are often excluded from climate planning and adaptive strategies. The Gulf countries are highly dependent on migrant workers from South Asia and Africa, particularly in sectors that are most exposed to weather and outdoor climate conditions such as construction, transportation, security, and agriculture. These workers are vulnerable to occupational heat exposure, or heat stress, which can provoke health problems that increase the risk of certain diseases and affect their ability to maintain healthy and productive lives. [[5]](#endnote-5)

One of the OHCHR’s key messages on Human Rights and Climate Change is that state measures to address climate change must protect the rights of those most vulnerable to its impacts.[[6]](#endnote-6) While each of the Gulf states has a ‘summer work ban’ that pauses outdoor work during the afternoon between certain hours, these measures do not go far enough to protect migrants from heat stress. Firstly, across the region, a large number of migrant workers are entirely excluded from these protections, including delivery workers in the F&B sector who use motorbikes, attendants in petrol stations, and security guards. [[7]](#endnote-7)

Secondly, the bans are based on arbitrary calendar dates and set times that neither take into account wet-bulb temperatures, which is commonly used to evaluate the level of occupational heat stress experienced when working outdoors in the sun, nor even standard temperatures. For example, in the UAE, the 2021 summer work ban had not kicked in when the highest temperature of the year was registered at 51.8 °C in early June. Similarly, Bahrain recorded its hottest May in more than a century, nearly two months before its summer ban kicked in. In 2019, Kuwait and Saudi recorded the highest temperature on Earth, 63°C, before their summer work bans began. One worker in Kuwait was found dead next to his tools, killed by heat stroke.[[8]](#endnote-8) While Qatar became the first Gulf country to adopt the Wet Bulb Global Index in 2021, it has set the ceiling at which work must stop at a dangerously high temperature (32.1°C), and does not mandate breaks for temperatures lower than this. [[9]](#endnote-9)

Thirdly, the bans do not adequately address the need for breaks, hydration, and transportation issues. Many companies, especially construction sites, may stop work, but workers continue to stay on site in extreme temperatures. Workers who are not provided transportation have to spend more on traveling to and from their accommodation. Finally, violations of the law are also extremely high.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The result is that migrant workers are disproportionately vulnerable to heat stress, the effects of which can be deadly. A study on Nepali workers in Qatar found a link between the wet-bulb globe temperature and the cardiovascular issues that lead to death, with fatalities due to cardiovascular failures doubling in hotter months.[[11]](#endnote-11) A 2020 study on Kuwait found that the overall number of deaths doubles on extremely hot days, but triples for non-Kuwaiti men, who form the majority of the low-income workforce.[[12]](#endnote-12) While quality data on migrant worker deaths is limited, experts and government officials do highlight the impact of working in extreme temperatures on the high rates of ‘natural’ deaths and ‘heart attacks’ among migrant men who left their countries of origin healthy enough to pass strict and mandatory pre-departure health exams.[[13]](#endnote-13) Medical researchers also believe that migrant workers in the Gulf may suffer from a form of chronic kidney disease, CKDnt, which appears to disproportionately affect men performing strenuous work in hot climates.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Migrant workers labouring out doors are not only susceptible to heat-related illness, but are also at risk from extremely high levels of air pollution. [[15]](#endnote-15)According to the 2020 State of Global Air Report, the Gulf states rank very high globally for ambient fine particle air pollution (PM 2.5), which are emitted from vehicles, industrial activities and waste burning. The 2020 report has ranked Qatar fourth globally for the highest population-weighted annual average PM 2.5 exposures in 2019.  Exposure to high average PM2.5 concentrations over multiple years has been demonstrated in studies to be the most constant and strong predictor of death from cardiovascular, respiratory, and other disorders.[[16]](#endnote-16) None of the Gulf countries has implemented policies to ensure safe PM 2.5 levels at work sites and outdoors in general.

The climate vulnerabilities and harms migrant workers experience are not limited to the workplace; poor conditions in labour camps and informal housing exacerbate climate harms, making it difficult for workers to adequately rest and recoup. Rising water and electricity prices, especially where migrants are excluded from subsidies, can make it difficult to adapt; on the other hand, the need for air conditioning, particularly in tight spaces, can harm indoor air quality and lead to further illness.

Migrants in informal housing are also more exposed to damages from sudden storms and cyclones that are becoming more frequent in the region due to climate change.[[17]](#endnote-17) Unlike citizens, migrants lack inclusion in social protection systems, and as exemplified during state responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, would not receive financial assistance or in the event of a sudden-onset incident.[[18]](#endnote-18) Migrant workers are also more likely to be involved in rescue, cleanup and restoration during and after extreme weather events, exposing them to further hazardous conditions.

Furthermore, GCC states are heavily dependent on food imports, upwards of 80-90% in some countries, due to scarce water resources, poor soils, and overexploited aquifers. Demand is expected to exceed sustainable water supplies by 40% in 2050, and precipitation over the region is expected to decline by 2050 due to climate change.[[19]](#endnote-19) Import of essential food comes at a cost and is not necessarily affordable to lower-income migrants. The production that does happen locally is conducted almost entirely by migrant workers under very harsh conditions —- be it in farming, agricultural or herding. [[20]](#endnote-20)

Climate-induced mortality and morbidity have significant effects on migrant workers and the families they often leave behind. Families may lose their only source of income - relied on for household expenses, repayment of loans, and school fees —- if a migrant worker dies or becomes severely ill and loses their livelihood and productive time. OSH laws in the Gulf do not adequately compensate migrant workers for heated-related illness, injury, or death. In most cases, the long-term effects of working in hot temperatures are not recognized as causes of death or illness. Though fines are imposed on companies who violate summer working bans, these funds are not used to provide relief for the harmed workers.

Due to the region’s dependence on foreign labour, the GCC states have relatively open regular migration channels, one of OHCHR’s key recommendations for climate change actions. However, this action intersects with other obligations, including the responsibility of states to address the specific human rights protection needs of migrants, including the provision of food and clean water; access to adequate housing, health care and social security, education, and decent work opportunities. Migrant workers will undoubtedly continue to power the region’s rapid development, including climate adaptive infrastructure, and must be centered in all climate change policies.

**The GCC countries enjoy the resources to be able to mitigate both climate change and the effects of climate change on its most vulnerable population. In cooperation with the international community, the GCC states must take steps to address the disproportionate impact of climate change on its migrant worker population by:**

1. Improving Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) protections for migrant workers, with specific attention to all workers in outdoor spaces. Specifically, to adopt the wet-bulb globe temperature (WBGT) index to determine when it is too dangerous for out-door work, improve heat stress mitigation regulations, and increase monitoring and enforcement mechanisms;
2. Providing accessible grievance mechanisms for workers to complain of OSH violations, and fair compensation for injury, illness, or death related to environmental factors;
3. Investigating and disseminating publicly the impact of heat stress and high temperatures on worker morbidity and mortality;
4. Involving and consulting with migrant workers in developing and adopting climate change policies, to avoid protection gaps and counterproductive measures that fail to consider their needs;
5. Providing researchers and the private sector with climate financing to investigate and adapt. This is especially critical given that governments contract much of the projects, particularly in construction, that put migrant workers at risk.

Sources

1. Raymond, C. (2020). The emergence of heat and humidity too severe for human tolerance. Sci Adv 6: eaaw1838. [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aaw183](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw1838) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Wet-bulb temperature measures the combination of heat and humidity. When too high, the human body’s ability to cool itself is hampered. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bolleter, J. (2021). Wet-bulb Temperature and Sea-level Rise in the United Arab Emirates–Planning Responses. *Planning Practice & Research*, *36*(4), 408-429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2020.1859199> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Zittis, G. (2021). Business-as-usual will lead to super and ultra-extreme heatwaves in the Middle East and North Africa. *npj Climate and Atmospheric Science*, *4*(1), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41612-021-00178-7> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ioannou, L. G. (2021). Occupational Heat Stress: Multi-Country Observations and Interventions. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *18*(12), 6303. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18126303> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. "Understanding Human Rights and Climate Change - OHCHR." <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/COP21.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. "Summer outdoor work bans end across the GCC, but heat stress ...." 2 Oct. 2019, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2019/10/summer-outdoor-work-band-end-across-the-gcc-but-heat-stress-continues/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. "Kuwait and Saudi Arabia record highest temperature on earth." 12 Jun. 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait-and-saudi-arabia-record-highest-temperature-on-earth-1.1560325581417>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. "Summer midday work ban fails to adequately protect workers." 14 Jun. 2021, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2021/06/summer-midday-work-ban-fails-to-adequately-protect-workers/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. "Summer outdoor work bans end across the GCC, but heat stress ...." 2 Oct. 2019, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2019/10/summer-outdoor-work-band-end-across-the-gcc-but-heat-stress-continues/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Pradhan, B. (2019). Heat stress impacts on cardiac mortality in Nepali migrant workers in Qatar. *Cardiology*, *143*(1), 37-48. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000500853> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Alahmad, B. (2020). Extreme temperatures and mortality in Kuwait: who is vulnerable?. *Science of The Total Environment*, *732*, 139289. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.139289.> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. "Dropping Dead | Migrant-Rights.org." 3 Dec. 2021, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2021/12/dropping-dead/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. "The Deaths Of Migrants In The Gulf - FairSquare." 12 Mar. 2022, <https://fairsq.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/03/Vital-Signs-Report-1.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Fossil fuel burning — particularly the burning of heavy oil in power plants, refineries and factories — is the leading cause of air pollution in the Gulf. According to scientists, “The second most important source is soil dust, which is in principle ‘natural’ but can increase with climate change due to drought and desertification.” “For the Gulf region, global air quality report is a wake-up call” 5 June 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1506476/middle-east> [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Health Effects Institute. (2020) State of Global Air 2020. Special Report. Boston, MA:Health Effects Institute., [https://www.stateofglobalair.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020-10/soga-2020-report-10-26\_0.pdf](Health%20Effects%20Institute.%202020.%20State%20of%20Global%20Air%202020.%20Special%20Report.%20Boston%2C%20MA%3AHealth%20Effects%20Institute.%2C%20https%3A/www.stateofglobalair.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020-10/soga-2020-report-10-26_0.pdf) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. "Cyclone Shaheen: A reminder of the Arabian Peninsula's ...." 8 Oct. 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/cyclone-shaheen-reminder-arabian-peninsulas-vulnerability-extreme-weather-events>. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. "COVID Relief Report 2021 - Migrant-Rights.org." <https://www.migrant-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Covid-Relief-Report-Migrant-Rights.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. "Food security: The Gulf Cooperation Council states in dire straits." 13 Jul. 2017, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2017/07/food-security-gulf-cooperation-council-states/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. "Where goats are king and men suffer - Migrant-Rights.org." <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2017/11/where-goats-are-king-and-men-suffer/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)