**REGIONAL MEETING FOR THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT**

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**Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important regional meeting on the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent.

I will be speaking about access to development and to economic and social rights – through the particular lens of labour migration. And specifically migration in the corridor between Africa and the Arab States. I’ll then present some of the developments in Qatar – where the ILO is supporting the Government in delivering a comprehensive labour reform agenda.

A labour reform agenda that is in line with the aims of this initiative – that is, to advance social justice, promote human rights, and create more prosperous communities, in line with the SDGs – for all workers, including the hundreds of thousands of African workers who live in Qatar today.

Labour migration has long been recognized as one of the potential drivers to accelerate socio-economic development in certain African states. Demand for foreign labour in the Arab States creates opportunities for workers from all regions to access more and better employment opportunities, earn higher wages, and learn new skills. At the same time, African workers also contribute significantly to the socio-economic development of the Arab States.

However, there are challenges that prevent or limit the potential benefits of labour migration. Structural gaps in labour migration governance, inadequate labour market information systems, unfair labour practices, and limited access to social protection. Before setting out some of the challenges - and the responses that the ILO has been supporting, let me first present some of the evolving labour migration trends between Africa and the Arab States.

**Context setting with data**

The 12 Arab States host over 24 million migrant workers, representing 14 per cent of all migrant workers worldwide. This is the highest global share of migrant workers as a proportion of the total workforce, reaching 41 per cent in 2019, compared to the global average of just 5 per cent.

Close to 83 per cent of all migrant workers in the region are men. Women constitute only 17 per cent of the region’s migrant worker population. This can be attributed to the gender segregated industries, including in the labour-intensive construction sector, for example.

Although the vast majority of migrant workers in the region come from Asia and the Arab States, there are a significant number of workers from Africa – particularly from north and east Africa. However, because only a few countries in the Arab States publish disaggregated data on the basis of nationality, it is extremely difficult to capture the full picture of migration from African countries to the region.

For those countries that do make available such administrative data, we can identify key trends for African migrants, including in terms of gender and sector of work. For example:

* In Kuwait in 2020, 73 per cent of African migrants were female, and were predominantly involved in the domestic work sector.
* In Oman in 2019, women made up 99 per cent of Ugandan migrants, 89 per cent of Tanzanian migrants and 98 per cent of Ethiopian migrants.

For several years, the number of African migrants was on a downward trend in several countries in the region. This was a result of the efforts to nationalize labour markets, which affects middle- and higher-income African migrants. There were also campaigns to deport migrants in an irregular situation. And some African countries placed bans on migration to the Middle East due to concerns about abuse and exploitation. These bans did not necessarily stop outflows, but in many cases forced them to use unlicensed recruitment agencies or irregular channels, which increases their vulnerability, and makes it harder to measure migration flows.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the number of migrant workers in the Arab States region, and disproportionately affected African nationals. More recent figures, however, suggest that the numbers are on the rise again.

**Inter-regional meeting**

In light of the increasing numbers of African migrants employed in the Arab States, and building on the growing political momentum to strengthen dialogue, the African Union Commission and the ILO organized the first Tripartite Inter-regional Meeting on Labour Migration in November 2021.

The discussions focused on issues that require cooperation between countries of origin and countries of destination, including skills development, fair recruitment, social protection and others. I won’t attempt to summarize the discussions here, but I encourage you to seek out the reports from the thematic expert panels.

As a follow up to that meeting, the State of Qatar has been in discussions with the African Union Commission regarding hosting a meeting in Doha in 2023, with a view to establishing a new regular dialogue on labour migration between Africa and the Arab States.

**Focus on Qatar**

Let me take that opportunity to shift our focus to Qatar. And indeed the world’s attention has shifted to Qatar due to the spotlight provided by the World Cup taking place later this month.

For many years, various institutions and bodies have raised concerns about working and living conditions for workers in Qatar. This includes the ILO Committee of Experts on the application on international labour standards, the Universal Periodic Review in 2019, and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Ms E. Tendayi Achiume, after a visit to Qatar in 2019.

The concerns centre on the kafala or sponsorship system – which exists across the region – and ties a worker to their employer, and thus enables the exploitation of migrant workers, amounting at times to forced labour.

The Special Rapporteur on racism called on Qatar to do more - quote - “in the light of the persistent complex challenges that undermine its compliance with its international obligations and threaten the achievement of genuine equality and non-discrimination, including the overwhelming role that national origin and nationality currently play in determining access to human rights.” End quote.

It is important to note that the Special Rapporteur and others have also commended the significant labour reforms implemented by the State of Qatar to improve conditions for low-income migrant workers. This is the part of the story that is less well known. The Government has engaged with the international community, with the ILO, the international trade unions and the International Organization of Employers – and in the past five years has introduced significant changes.

I’d like to highlight three reforms that are most relevant to our discussion today.

Significant **changes have been introduced to the kafala system**. Most importantly, workers can now legally change jobs without permission from their employers. In the two years since these reforms were introduced, over 350,000 workers have changed employers, a significant proportion of the workforce. With the introduction of these kafala reforms, workers have more power to negotiate with employers for better conditions, and employers are incentivized to offer better working and living conditions, and better wages, in order to attract and retain workers.

The introduction of labour mobility and the creation of a labour market helps to break down the role that nationality or race may have previously played in restricting workers’ advancement to higher-paying jobs or jobs in different sectors.

Another key reform has been the **introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage** in March 2021 – a first in the region. It applies to all workers of all nationalities across all sectors, including domestic work – a sector in which we’ve heard reports of African women being paid less than women of other nationalities. The introduction of the minimum wage has led to 280,000 workers, or 13% of the workforce, seeing their wages increase.

In a survey we commissioned from earlier this year, we found that the lowest wage earners, were sending home 81 per cent of their income in remittances to support several family members.

A third key reform that I want to highlight is about building workers’ voice and representation. Qatari law does not allow for foreign workers to form or join trade unions. However, legislation adopted in 2019 allows for elected migrant worker representatives in worker-management committees at the enterprise level – a first in the Gulf region. We have a growing community of male and female migrant worker leaders from Africa – in the hospitality sector, in domestic work, in transportation, in security, etc.

The ILO and the Ministry of Labour, in cooperation with the global trade unions, provide training to the worker and management representatives, on how to enhance company policies on grievance mechanisms, on violence and harassment, and most recently on non-discrimination – always guided by international labour standards.

There is a universal recognition – from the Government of Qatar, from the ILO, from the trade unions and NGOs – that there are gaps in the implementation of the labour reforms. This is not surprising given their magnitude. It takes time to build institutions and change mindsets. A high-level African trade union delegation visited Qatar earlier this year, and I quote from their statement: “We are confident that the reforms are real and are being implemented, howbeit with some challenges, notably from employers and the established culture of many years.” End quote.

Whereas the labour reforms will contribute to tackling discrimination in the labour market, we must also recognize the historical legacy of slavery as an added barrier. I encourage any visitors to Qatar to visit Bin Jelmood House. It is perhaps the only museum in the world dedicated to the slave trade in the Indian Ocean region. It tells the history of discrimination and abuse against people of African descent in Qatar and in the region, and how this still echoes today. This history undoubtedly has repercussions in terms of social mobility for people of African descent in the region – and I commend the museum authorities for enabling difficult but necessary conversations on this subject.

The ILO will continue to support the labour reforms in Qatar. And it is clear that there is a need to engage more closely with governments and social partners in Africa – to enhance bilateral and inter-regional cooperation - to address the risks and challenges related to labour migration governance, as well as to enhance the opportunities that migration can bring.

Thank you again for the invitation to participate in this important discussion.