**Panel discussion on 25th Anniversary of Migrant Worker Rights Convention:  
Statement of Mustafa Qadri, Gulf migrant rights researcher Amnesty International**

Mr. Francisco Carrion Mena, Chair of the CMW Committee, distinguished guests, thank you for this opportunity to speak.

Twenty-five years since its first adoption, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (‘the Convention’) is arguably more relevant than ever before. An estimated 20-25 million migrant workers[[1]](#footnote-1) have fuelled the economies of states across the Gulf, nearly half the total population, not least in the oil and gas-rich countries where they perform vital roles in construction and other industries and in the service sector. Yet at present none of the six Gulf Cooperation Council states has signed, let alone ratified the Convention. Migrant workers remain inadequately protected under local labour laws and, in practice, millions are subjected to daily exploitation and abuse.

Across the Gulf states, the sponsorship, or kafala, system used to recruit migrant workers and regulate their employment has created the conditions for forced labour to thrive. Many migrant workers in the region are required by employers to work excessive hours without rest or days off and are prevented by threat of arrest and deportation from leaving abusive employers. For example, the Saudi Arabian authorities continue to engage in mass expulsions of so-called “surplus” migrant workers to Yemen and other countries, often after first detaining them in harsh conditions. Perhaps most vulnerable of all are the many thousands of women, mostly from Asia, who are employed as domestic workers and subjected to physical or other abuse, including sexual abuse, as well as labour abuse without any or adequate means of remedy. At the end of last year, the GCC states appeared to offer a glimmer of hope when they jointly issued a public statement promising to implement mandatory requirements regarding the right to leave, daily working hours and overtime, and accommodation. But these promises were quickly recalled, reflecting the significant gap between statements and reality.

Much of the global attention on migrant workers has focused on Qatar because of its selection as host of the 2022 football World Cup. The United Arab Emirates has also received some attention, particular in the context of abuse of workers for high profile and mega projects. Some claim the targeting of these states is unfair and arbitrary. But with millions of workers without basic protections and with the demand for migrant labour increasing each year, there is an urgent need for reform. I also believe this is an historic opportunity for Qatar, the UAE and indeed the region to build an enduring legacy of respect for some of the most marginalised and silence victims of human rights abuse. In years ahead, ratification and implementation of the Convention could be as important a monument to human rights as the towering spires of GCC cities are to the rapid transformation of the region that migrant labour itself has brought into existence.

We should therefore pause today not only to reflect on the importance of the Convention to ensuring migrant worker rights, but also the need for continued energy, urgency and cooperation to ensure the many millions of migrant workers in the GCC countries are given the inherent dignity, respect, and protections that they deserve. Much more is needed, but I believe much more is possible. Most importantly, all of us have a role to play in ensuring better respect for the rights of migrant workers: from GCC states, to labour origin countries, multi-national and other businesses, civil society and workers groups, and, of course, the United Nations system.

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1. “GCC: Total population and percentage of nationals and non-nationals in GCC countries (latest national statistics, 2010-2014)”, Gulf Labour Markets and Migration, <http://gulfmigration.eu/gcc-total-population-and-percentage-of-nationals-and-non-nationals-in-gcc-countries-latest-national-statistics-2010-2014/> (accessed 4 September 2015). Note the data available here refers to “non-nationals” which may include individuals who do not meet the definition of ‘migrant’ or ‘migrant worker’ under the Migrant Workers Rights Convention, eg in some GCC states women born with full nationality who marry individuals who are non-nationals. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)