

Empty stadiums and empty promises

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The failures of the IAAF World Championships began long before the games themselves, says Human Rights without Frontiers' Willy Fautre.

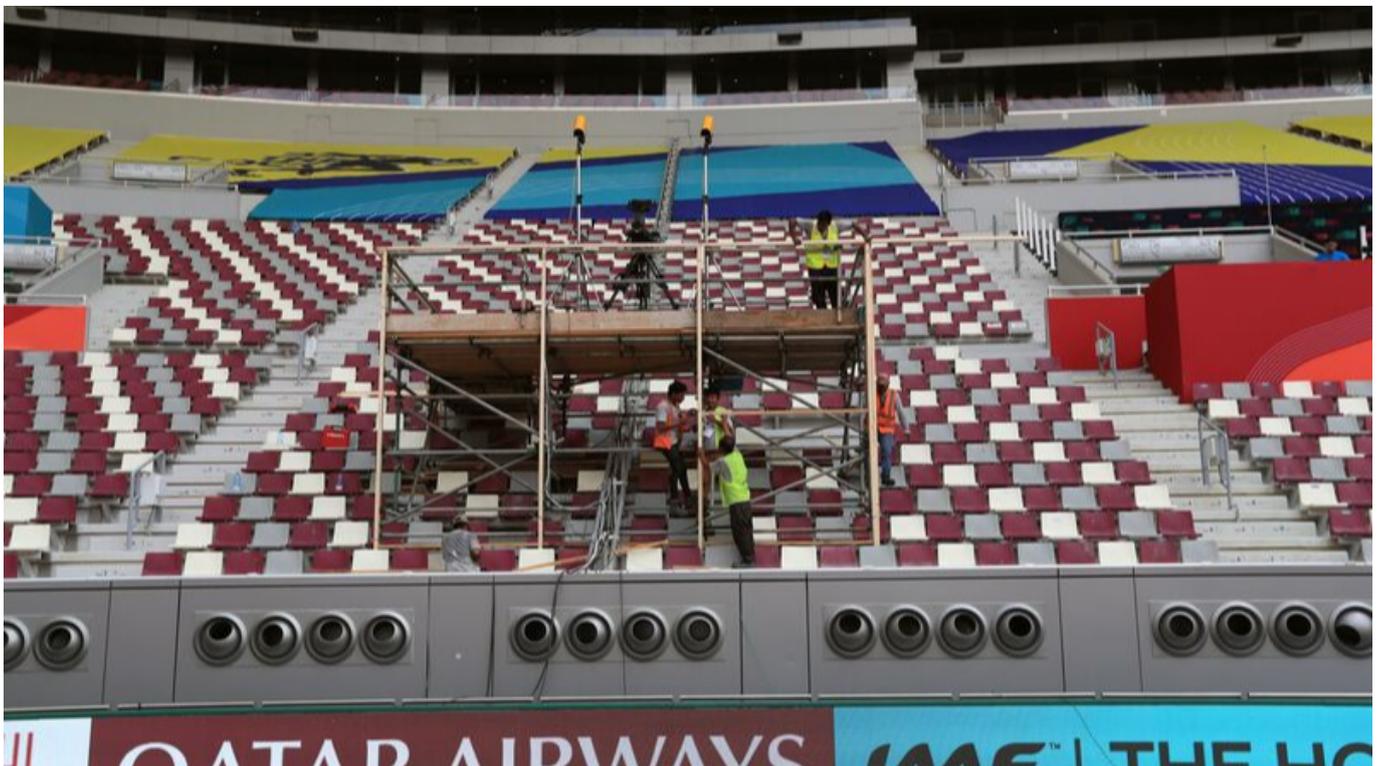


Photo Credit: Press Association

This week commentators, athletes and spectators criticised the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) over numerous failures of the 2019 Athletics World Championships in Doha.

Victory laps in front of empty stadiums, unbearable heat and collapsing runners tell the story of a very different Championships to the one promised by Qatar when they bid to host the event in 2011.

Former British Olympic Champion, Denise Lewis, is among those in the athletics community who have been outspoken about the failure of the games, saying the governing body had “let athletes down massively”.

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For many, the games will go down as a PR disaster, for both the IAAF and Qatar, who's earlier promise of "no empty seats" rings as hollow as the stadium itself.

Clearly, the execution of the Doha World Championships raises significant questions for the organisers. However, the truth is that these Championships failed long before the first starting gun was fired and it is not just the athletes who have been let down by the IAAF.

The games failed when the athletics authorities allowed their showpiece event to be built by abjectly treated migrant workers, often unpaid and, in many cases, putting their lives at risk.

"For five months I had to live with very little food and no salary. My family was really affected. Tears come to my eyes when I remember where we used to go to find food - in the bins. The company owes me a lot of money which they refuse to pay me" **Kenyan migrant worker**

Contrary to the lucrative lifestyles promised, they have found themselves victims of abusive employment practices, with neither IAAF nor the Qatari state making any effort to protect their interests.

Amnesty International have consistently highlighted the plight of migrant workers in Qatar. According to their 2016 report workers on the main Khalifa Stadium have been 'ruthlessly and systematically exploited'.

Last week, Amnesty International released their latest report, shedding further light on the exploitation of the thousands of migrant workers in Qatar, in particular relation to these championships and the 2022 World Cup.

The report found that at least 1,620 workers from three Qatari companies involved in construction and cleaning had submitted complaints over unpaid wages.

One Kenyan worker told Amnesty: "For five months I had to live with very little food and no salary. My family was really affected. Tears come to my eyes when I remember where we used to go to find food - in the bins. The company owes me a lot of money which they refuse to pay me."

However, let us not be fooled by these figures. The true scale of the problem is likely to be far greater.

The US State Department estimates more than 6,000 workers submitted complaints to Qatar's new Committees for the Settlement of Labour Disputes last year, with hundreds returning home without compensation.

“The games failed when the athletics community allowed their showpiece calendar event to be built in Qatar by migrant workers who have been abjectly treated, unpaid and, in many cases, have put their lives at risk”

This is tantamount to slave labour, no more, no less and it is time we started calling it out for what it is.

The international community has all the facts and a clear picture of the situation, there is no excuse for inaction. The abuse these workers are facing stands in dark contrast with the values of fair and generous behaviour that great sportspeople and fans hold dear.

To further quantify this tragedy, there were zero deaths in the building of London's Olympic Games, 10 in the construction of 2008's Beijing Games and 21 for Russia's 2018 World Cup.

How is anyone able to stand idly by when it is estimated that by the time of the 2022 World Cup, the toll in Qatar could reach a staggering 4,000 deaths?

There are three years until the World Cup arrives in Doha. Before then we must resolve to bring an end to the suffering of migrant workers at the hands of the Qatari state.

No sporting spectacle is worth the suffering of innocent workers, who are simply trying to provide a better life for their families.

FIFA must finally step up where the IAAF has failed, call out and sanction Qatar for their appalling treatment of workers.

About the author

Willy Fautre is the Director and Co-Founder of Human Rights without Frontiers.

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