

UN calls for greater heat protection for workers in Qatar

AFP, Doha

Improved safeguards and working hours are needed to protect labourers in Qatar from the effects of heat and humidity, the United Nations said Friday, as it published new research.

The desert monarchy has come under fire for conditions faced by its hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, as it prepares to host the 2022 World Cup.

The risks of Qatar's heat and humidity were again thrust into the spotlight at the recent World Athletics Championships in Doha when women's marathon runners collapsed because of the conditions, despite the race being staged at midnight.

Humidity hovered around 73 percent and the temperature was 33 degrees Celsius (91 degrees Fahrenheit) for much of last month's race.

The study, commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Qatar's labour ministry, praised measures taken to reduce the effects of heat on 4,000 workers at one World Cup stadium project.

It concluded that while the heat mitigation steps taken by the body responsible for delivering the football showcase were "moderately to highly acceptable", other employers in Qatar could improve protections.

Of Qatar's roughly 1.9 million workers, just 30,000 work directly on World Cup projects.

The head of the UN agency's Qatar project office, Houtan Homayounpour, said the project was working with the government to turn the study's recommendations into "improved legislation".

Workers need to be able to set their own pace, he told AFP, in terms of "when to stop, when to have a break, when to drink water -- it's very important... They know best how they feel."

"We'll be promoting this very hard across the country in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour."

Homayounpour said the research also indicated a need to extend the ban on work during the hottest hours of the day, as well as the period of the year to which it applies.

The law currently states that work on exposed sites must stop between 11:30 am and 3:00 pm between June and August.

Researchers from the University of Thessaly in Greece reviewed more than 5,500 hours of work as part of their research, the largest ever study of its kind and the first in the region.

The study tracked environmental conditions over summer this year and the physiological responses of 125 workers subjected to different heat mitigation strategies.

It compared practises at the under-construction 40,000-capacity Al-Rayyan stadium west of Doha with a rural farm, looking at the impact of hydration, work-rest ratios and clothing on heat strain.

- 'Leading the region' -

Workers on the stadium project, run by the Supreme Committee organising the World Cup, mitigated conditions through frequent breaks as well as access to shade and water, according to the study.

The researchers recommended companies in Qatar introduce heat stress alleviation plans and annual health check-ups as well as adjusting summertime working hours and empowering employees to take responsibility for their welfare.

Projects run by Qatar's Supreme Committee are acknowledged by human rights groups to generally offer their workers better protections and rights than schemes not under the supervision of the World Cup organisers.

On Thursday, Human Rights Watch called on Qatar to "thoroughly and urgently investigate" worker deaths following publication of research linking cardiovascular fatalities in the country to heatstroke.

The study, published by Cardiology Journal in July, probed the "relationship between deaths of more than 1,300 Nepali workers between 2009 and 2017 and heat exposure", according to HRW.

Government spokesman, Sheikh Jassim bin Mansour Al-Thani, said: "Qatar has worked relentlessly for years... to ensure the wellbeing and safety of all workers" and that "to suggest otherwise is false and misleading".

Qatar is now "leading the region on workers' health and safety", he said in a statement, adding that summer working rules had been "strictly implemented" and more than 300 work suspension cases were ordered in summer 2019.



Pro-Turkish Syrian fighters cross the border into Syria as they take part in an offensive against Kurdish-controlled areas in northeastern Syria launched by the Turkish military yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkey intensifies Syria campaign

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did not back him.

Yesterday, Turkish warplanes and artillery struck around Syria's Ras al Ain, one of two border towns that have been the focus of the offensive. Reuters journalists heard gunfire there from across the frontier in the Turkish town of Ceylanpinar.

A convoy of 20 armoured vehicles carrying Turkish-allied Syrian rebels entered Syria from Ceylanpinar. Some made victory signs, shouting "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest) and waving Syrian rebel flags as they advanced towards Ras al Ain.

Some 120 km (75 miles) to the west, Turkish howitzers resumed shelling near the Syrian town of Tel Abyad, a witness said.

"In these moments, Tel Abyad is seeing the most intense battles in three days," Marvan Qamishlo, a spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said.

Overnight, clashes erupted at different points along the border from Ain Diwar at the Iraqi frontier to Kobani, more than 400 km to the west. Turkish and SDF forces exchanged shelling in Qamishli among other places, the SDF's Qamishlo said.

"The whole border was on fire," he said.

Turkish forces have seized nine villages near Ras al Ain and Tel Abyad, said Rami Abdulrahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the war.

At least 32 fighters with the SDF and 34 Turkey-backed Syrian rebels have been killed in fighting, while 10 civilians have been killed, Abdulrahman said. The SDF said 22 of its fighters were killed on Wednesday and Thursday.

Turkey says it has killed hundreds of SDF fighters in the operation and

one Turkish soldier has been killed.

Turkey says the purpose of its assault is to defeat the Kurdish YPG militia, which it sees as an enemy for its links to insurgents in Turkey. It says it aims to set up a "safe zone" inside Syria, where it can resettle many of the 3.6 million refugees it has been hosting.

The International Rescue Committee aid group says 64,000 people in Syria have fled in the first days of the campaign.

The Kurdish YPG is the main fighting element of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which have acted as the principal allies of the United States in a campaign that recaptured territory held by the Islamic State group.

The SDF now holds most of the territory that once made up Islamic State's "caliphate" in Syria, and has been keeping thousands of Islamic State fighters in jail and tens of

thousands of their family members in camps.

A camp sheltering more than 7,000 displaced people in northern Syria is to be evacuated and there are talks on moving a second camp for 13,000 people including Islamic State fighters' families, after both were shelled, Kurdish-led authorities said.

Medecins Sans Frontieres said a hospital in Tel Abyad had been forced to shut after most of its staff fled from bombings over the past 24 hours.

Western countries' rejection of the Turkish offensive creates a rift within the Nato alliance, in which Turkey is the main Muslim member.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said after talks with Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Istanbul that he expected Turkey to act with restraint in Syria. Cavusoglu said Ankara expected "strong solidarity" from the alliance.

Indonesian leader tightens security for ministers after attack

REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesian President Joko Widodo said yesterday he had ordered tighter security for state officials a day after a suspected Islamist militant stabbed the chief security minister as he was greeting crowds in a provincial town.

Indonesia, which is the world's biggest Muslim-majority country, is grappling with a resurgence in militancy and hundreds of suspects have been detained under tighter new anti-terrorism laws since the beginning of 2019.

Minister Wiranto, 72, who like many Indonesians uses just one name, underwent surgery in Jakarta after sustaining two wounds to the stomach in the attack after he had opened a university building in Pandeglang.

He was the first senior politician to be attacked in recent years and the president said he should be the last.

Mothers

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exams, the teachers believe. Rahid Ali's mother, Rima Begum who has been attending classes with her son, said the boy has better concentration now.

Rini Begum, another mother from Poladanga area, said her son's absenteeism has been reduced recently.

Head Teacher Monowara said most of the students are from poor families and the mothers do not have much education. "But their presence and engagement help a lot."

Tasemuddin, assistant upazila education officer, said, "We are proud of this school for taking this step. It has been possible because of the inventiveness of teachers."

Woman

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money from her father. After repeated such incidents, Salma recently decided to get separated from him and kept their son in her father's house in the neighbouring village.

Modi, Xi look to patch up

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had stayed silent over the current upheaval in Hong Kong.

"Frankly, the optics surrounding this visit don't look very promising at the moment," Harsh Pant, an international relations professor at King's College London, told AFP.

China's backing of Pakistan "has left a very bad taste in India's mouth", Pant said.

DINNER AND DANCE

India and China -- home to more than a third of humanity -- have never been the best of friends, going to war in 1962 and engaging in a series of Himalayan standoffs since.

The Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader and long a thorn in China's side, has been allowed to live in and travel the world from his base Dharamsala in northern India since 1959.

In 2017 Delhi and Beijing staged an alarming two-month face-off on the Doklam plateau -- claimed by China and Bhutan -- when Chinese troops started building a road and India sent

its forces to halt them.

However, the following year Xi and Modi patched things up in China's Wuhan. Their latest meeting, over elaborate meals and dance performances in Mahabalipuram, is aimed at building on that.

The key free-wheeling one-on-one meeting between Xi and Modi will take place this morning. The two leaders will have six hours of one-on-one talks and separate statements will be issued, government sources said.

Mahabalipuram -- home to historical monuments that pay testament to India and China's ancient ties -- has seen more than 40 Tibetans, including a prominent activist, reportedly detained ahead of the summit.

But since Wuhan other irritants have emerged, including a reported "scuffle" in Ladakh last month and Indian military activities in the northern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, part of which Beijing claims.

India and Washington, seeking with

others to counter China's growing regional assertiveness, have deepened military cooperation and India has moved closer to the Quad security dialogue with Japan, the United States and Australia.

On commerce India and China -- both facing a protectionist America -- want greater access to each other's markets, with India currently importing from China far more than it exports there.

Beijing also wants Delhi to ignore Western cyber-security concerns on Huawei -- already a big player in the India mobile sector -- and allow the telecoms firm to be part of 5G trials.

Huawei's "contribution to India's economic and social development is obvious to all," China's foreign ministry said this week, hoping Delhi would make "independent and objective judgments and decisions".

Xi will head to Nepal today, the first Chinese president to visit the buffer state between India and China in 22 years.

UK to send robot spider to the moon

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US, Russia and China. A recent attempt by a private Israeli company ended in disaster when the lander crashed on the surface.

Unveiled during the New Scientist Live event at London's ExCeL, the robot was designed by UK start-up space company SpaceBit.

SpaceBit founder Pavlo Tanasyuk said: "Our goal is to go there and see what is available there for all humanity to explore."

He added that, unlike rovers with wheels or tracks, this robot with four legs would provide an opportunity for "something a little bit like a human" to explore the lunar surface.

In May, Nasa announced that Astrobotic and two other companies had been awarded funding to build lunar landers.

Astrobotic was awarded millions of dollars to carry up to 14 Nasa instruments to the moon as well as 14 payloads from other partners.

SpaceBit will be one of those partners, sending the rover to the surface inside Astrobotic's Peregrine lander.

It is expected to land near the region of Mare Serenitatis -- the Sea of Serenity -- in June or July 2021.

Once the lander reaches the moon, the 1.5kg (3lb 5oz) rover will drop from beneath it to the surface along with other payloads.

It will scuttle across the surface taking measurements and collecting exploration data. The rover is battery-powered, but a small solar panel will also harness energy from the sun.

It also has two cameras that will enable it to take "robot selfies",

SpaceBit said.

The reason for the legs is to allow the robot to enter lava tubes in future missions, which has not been possible before.

Ukrainian-born Tanasyuk said: "After we land, we will be exploring the moon surface, and hopefully we will be able to get into the lava tubes and explore the environment there."

"So we hope to find a stable temperature which will be suited for future human missions to the moon."

"It is a rugged environment in the lava tubes so you can't really use wheels there -- that was why we had to design these legs instead of wheels."

The SpaceBit rover can withstand temperatures from up to 130C (266F) to minus 130C (minus 202F) at night, and will explore for the duration of a lunar day.

Top Iraq cleric says govt responsible for protest deaths

AFP, Karbala

The Iraqi government and security forces are "responsible for the bloodshed" during recent protests, top Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani said yesterday.

In a sermon read out at the main weekly prayers, Sistani gave authorities "two weeks" to release the findings of an investigation into the more than 100 deaths recorded during the protests since October 1.

Spiritual leader for Iraq's Shia majority, Sistani wields significant power to influence the government.

Iraq descended into violence at the start of the month as protests that began with demands for an end to rampant corruption and chronic unemployment escalated with calls for a complete overhaul of the political system.

The demonstrations from October 1-6 in Baghdad and across the south of the country quickly turned violent, as protests were met with tear gas and live fire, with over 100 killed and more than 6,000 wounded.

Uncertainty over the identity of the perpetrators persists, with authorities blaming "unidentified snipers".

But protestors and human rights advocates insist Iraqi security forces

participated in the violent repression of the rallies.

The demonstrations were unprecedented because of their apparent spontaneity and independence in a deeply politicised society.

Sistani endorsed the protests on October 4, calling on the government to heed the demonstrators' demands "before it's too late".

"The government must change its approach in dealing with the country's problems," the cleric said, adding that lawmakers also bore a heavy responsibility.

Sistani wields huge influence within Iraq's Shia community, among whom the deadly protests were concentrated.

"The government and its security forces are responsible for the bloodshed during the recent protests", said Abdel Mahdi al-Karbala'i, a representative of Sistani who read his sermon in Karbala yesterday.

"What happened demonstrates an unfettered violence that goes beyond all limits of the imagination," he added, saying "the government is responsible when, under the eye of law enforcement, protestors are fired on illegally and media are beaten or attacked to terrorise their employees."

120 homes lost

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long, but the authorities did nothing to protect us," said Fatema Begum of Kalihati upazila's Beltia village who lost her house in the erosion and were leaving under the open sky.

Talking to The Daily Star, many more locals of Kalihati upazila echoed Fatema's statement.

Asked, WDB official Sirajul said they had a plan to construct a permanent embankment in the area during the next dry season.

"We already set up 600-metre CC blocks in the area," he added.

The authorities started dumping geo-bags in the area to prevent further erosion, he further added.

Visiting the area yesterday, Tangail Deputy Commissioner Md Shohidul

Islam said the district administration would make a proper list of affected people and provide them with necessary aid.

Tangail-4 (Kalihati) MP Hasan Imam Khan said the government would provide Tk 6,000 as financial aid and some other assistance to each affected family.

Meanwhile, the Jamuna posed a threat to several villages in Bhuapur upazila.

At least two government primary schools, three mosques and a temple were may be devoured for the erosion, said locals.

Earlier in July, around 300 homesteads and vast of croplands were devoured by the river in the upazila.