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JOINT STATEMENT: ILO SHOULD STAND FIRM AGAINST SAUDI EFFORTS TO DISMISS LABOUR RIGHTS COMPLAINT

The International Labour Organization governing body should reject Saudi Arabia's request to prematurely close the [Article 26 Complaint](#) brought by African trade union groups against the Gulf state.

The groups warned that closing the case at the upcoming 356th Session, which began on March 23, 2026, would disregard substantial evidence of ongoing harm, leaving millions of migrant workers at risk of ongoing abuses. The complaint, declared receivable at the previous [Governing Body session](#) raises urgent concerns about Saudi Arabia's persistent failure to effectively implement its obligations to protect migrant workers from forced labour, non-payment of wages, dangerous working conditions and discrimination, in accordance with key ILO Conventions it has ratified.

Evidence documented by trade unions and human rights groups, [UN bodies](#) and the [ILO supervisory system](#) shows widespread and ongoing abuses, including the charging of [illegal recruitment fees](#), [deceptive hiring](#), [wage theft](#), [excessive working hours](#), [unsafe conditions](#) and restrictions on movement.

The Government of Saudi Arabia's [response to the complaint](#) calls for it to be dismissed, citing recent reforms and procedural arguments. But it fails to present credible data or evidence that these reforms are being implemented effectively. Their response also fails to outline how the reforms are delivering improved working and living conditions for migrant workers and accountability for abusive employers.

The Saudi government seeks to undermine the testimony of many victims because it is presented anonymously for their protection. However, this fails to acknowledge that the [fear of reprisals](#) is real and credible for workers toiling under an oppressive sponsorship system, operated by a government which severely restricts freedom of expression, access to justice and criminalizes [human rights defenders](#).

This is underscored by the reckless decision of the Saudi government to explicitly name the leader of one of the African trade union originators of the complaint in its response. In doing so, the Saudi authorities have made alarmingly clear that their apparent priority is to expose and put at risk those who raise grievances and organize to defend the rights of migrant workers, instead of meaningfully engaging with the complaint on its merits.

Despite some [legislative changes](#), Saudi Arabia's kafala sponsorship system remains [largely intact](#), continuing to place million migrant workers [at risk of exploitation](#), compounded by [racial and gender-based discrimination](#). Migrant [domestic workers](#) and workers in other sectors, including agricultural workers and fishers, have been largely excluded from recent reforms and continue to face heightened risks owing to their ongoing exclusion from core labour protections.

Labour inspections [remain weak](#) and have been further undermined by [recent reductions](#) in sanctions for labour violations, such as cutting by more than two-thirds the penalties for employers who confiscate workers' passport and deny them weekly

rest time. The [government's own data](#) reveals that labour inspections focus overwhelmingly on monitoring company compliance with the State's targets for hiring Saudi employees and enforcing controls against migrants. These misplaced priorities enable a permissive environment in which [exploitation flourishes](#) and employers operate with near-total impunity.

The scale and persistence of these violations and abuses requires the Governing Body members to reject Saudi Arabia's call to dismiss the complaint. The complaint needs to remain open to ensure continued, rigorous ILO scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's labour rights record, until there is meaningful change for migrant workers.

Closing the complaint at this premature stage would deter trade unionists and migrant worker rights' advocates from pursuing the Article 26 complaint mechanism as a viable avenue for enforcing their ILO Convention rights.

SIGNATORIES

ALQST for Human Rights

Amnesty International

Equidem

FairSquare

Human Rights Watch

MRRORS