

## **Gulf Labor responds to Human Rights Watch Report on Saadiyat Island: Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Continues to Treat Worker Abuse as PR Problem**

On February 10, 2015, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released its new report on Saadiyat Island titled, *Migrant Workers: Saadiyat Island in the United Arab Emirates*. A few weeks earlier, on December 22, 2014, PricewaterhouseCoopers released its third report on labor conditions on the Island. Both reports confirm what Gulf Labor already highlighted in its own report of June 2014, and has been emphasizing since the 2011 launch of the artists' boycott of Saadiyat Island. In sum, while there are tangible improvements in the working and living conditions of migrant workers on the island, structural abuses are ongoing throughout the labor chain— including recruitment, contracts, housing, wages, grievance filing process, preventing collective worker action, denying worker representation, and more. The labor rights enforcement mechanisms, which TDIC and concerned Abu Dhabi authorities put in place in response to negative press generated by the initiatives of Gulf Labor and others, remain flawed both in their design and implementation.

Three separate reports issued by Human Rights Watch since 2009 have offered detailed recommendations on how to improve the living and working conditions of workers on Saadiyat Island. Yet, the Guggenheim and its partners in Abu Dhabi, including TDIC, continue to issue press releases which only highlight gains made on paper, while refusing to confront some of the most troubling revelations of these reports and investigations. Recent activities appear focused more on "image management," including the hiring of the PR firm Brunswick Group to respond to the activities of groups and individuals that raise issues relating to labor conditions on Saadiyat Island.

Chairman William L. Mack, and President Jennifer Blei Stockman of the Guggenheim Foundation's Board of Trustees, as well as those advising the authorities in Abu Dhabi and TDIC, need to recognize that this issue cannot be solved by treating it as a public relations problem. Rather, they need to address it as a problem of securing the basic right of workers to be treated fairly and with dignity.

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, TDIC, and other institutions such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Zayed National Museum (with its consulting partner, the British Museum), continue to delay substantive resolution even though they are fully briefed on the solutions proposed by HRW, the International Labor Organization (ILO), and Gulf Labor. Among the substantial steps available, the Guggenheim can immediately, and publicly, request that the UAE Ministry of Labor invite the ILO to put in place solutions to the questions of recruitment fees; passport confiscation; timely payment of fair wages; accommodations; and forms of worker representation and rights of association and collective bargaining.

TDIC and Abu Dhabi clearly have the resources to enforce laws that protect employers and stakeholders, as evidenced by the immediate imprisonment and deportation of striking workers in May 2014 (documented in HRW's report). It is time for them to enforce with equal enthusiasm the UAE laws that protect workers. The Guggenheim

continues to hide behind claims that construction has not begun, even as its own website celebrates its expanding Abu Dhabi collection, as showcased in the ongoing exhibition *Seeing Through Light*. Gulf Labor suggests that the Guggenheim should start seeing the light of workers' welfare, instead of through it.

Gulf Labor agrees with Human Rights Watch's Nicholas McGeehan when he states that Western institutions' consistent claims not to have enough power to effect any change in the UAE, constitutes a "denial of the political reality behind their presence there. They are there to boost the reputation of the United Arab Emirates. They are there because of their brand. They are there because they are reputable. By taking a firm stance and by making public calls for reform, it's not an exaggeration to say that these institutions could actually make a very positive contribution in the lives of millions of migrant workers and their families, not only in the UAE but beyond."

Sincerely,  
Gulf Labor Working Group

References:

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