

The Guardian view on Qatar's World Cup: gestures are not enough

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There are now less than 50 days to the World Cup in Qatar, which promoters have taken to describing as a tournament “like no other”. For once the PR hype is justified, and not only because the matches will be played during the lead-up to Christmas rather than in summer. The decision to stage the planet's biggest sporting event in a country with a notoriously poor human rights record is provoking unprecedented queasiness among competing nations.

Last week, in conjunction with the kit manufacturer Hummel, the Danish football federation unveiled a plain all-black third kit for the tournament. It was designed, said Hummel, in memory of the many migrant workers who died during construction work in the years leading up to the finals. The captains of some European teams – including England's Harry Kane – aim to wear rainbow “One Love” armbands, symbolising opposition to discrimination in a country where homosexual acts are illegal. The German federation invited a gay fan to use its platform at an event to address the Qatari ambassador on the subject of LGBT rights. Abdulla bin Mohammed bin Saud Al Thani reportedly responded that human rights issues were distracting from the tournament.

To the extent that this is true, it is of course a good thing. High-profile gestures by companies such as Hummel are far better than nothing at all. But time is running out for the kind of action that could leave a lasting positive legacy from a World Cup that should never have been awarded to these hosts. Football is a global game and a tournament in the Middle East is desirable in principle, but this is not the way.

With justification, Qatari authorities claim they have responded to pressure to reform brutally exploitative conditions for migrant workers. The hated kafala system, for example – which tied a worker to a single employer – has gone, and attempts have been made to compensate for unpaid wages and introduce minimum pay. But the latest in a series of Guardian investigations, published last month, found that, despite high-level initiatives and reassurances, abusive practices were still rife on the ground. Migrant workers at the Al Bayt stadium, where England will play the USA on 25 November, had been obliged to pay huge illegal recruitment fees and lived for months in unfit, overcrowded accommodation, earning £1 an hour. Elsewhere, labourers spoke of 12-hour shifts, six days a week, without proper overtime pay. A climate of fear inhibited many from speaking out about conditions. Migrant workers who have returned home ahead of the World Cup say they were sent back before finishing their contracts or without receiving all they claim they were owed.

A recent YouGov poll, commissioned by Amnesty International, found huge support for a compensation fund for migrant workers who have been mistreated, and for the relatives of those who died. Amnesty, along with other human rights groups, are campaigning for Fifa, world football's governing body, to set up such a fund using a fraction of anticipated profits of \$7bn. The amount proposed is \$440m – equivalent to World Cup prize money on offer. After prolonged hesitation, the English FA has now backed the principle of a fund, as have high-profile figures in football such as the Dutch national team manager, Louis van Gaal, and the Brazil coach, Tite. Fifa has said it is thinking about it. It's time to stop thinking and act.