



منظمة سند الحقوقية

SANAD Human Rights Organisation

2025.09.01 :Date

Joint Statement: Human Rights Concerns Regarding the UK's Free Trade Agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer

CC:

Secretary of State for Business and Trade Jonathan Reynolds

Dear Prime Minister Starmer,

We are writing on behalf of a coalition of rights groups and trade unions to express deep concern around the lack of transparency and rights protections in the forthcoming Free Trade Agreement between the United Kingdom (UK) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). We urge you to publicly pledge to incorporate strong human rights conditions before an agreement is signed. An agreement without explicit rights protections heightens the risks that UK businesses would become complicit in grave human rights abuses.

For decades, rights groups have documented systematic human rights violations against migrant workers in all six GCC countries.

Gulf states have systematically failed to prevent or remedy widespread labor violations against the millions of migrant workers who make up a significant proportion of these countries' workforces. A trade agreement with GCC states risks contributing to abuses against migrant workers by further facilitating wage abuse, employer exploitation, and situations that amount to forced labor.



The UK has itself failed to protect migrant workers' rights in the UK and has yet to enact comprehensive legislation governing how UK entities conduct business abroad, in line with the recommendations of the Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights. The Joint Committee recommended that "the Government should bring forward legislation to impose a duty on all companies to prevent human rights abuses, as well as an offence of failure to prevent human rights abuses for all companies, including parent companies, along the lines of the relevant provisions of the Bribery Act 2010." The UK Justice Coalition has called for the UK to enact such legislation.

The UK has released very little information on the timeline and substance of the negotiations and has not publicly pledged to include detailed rights protections for countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE that have dismal rights records, including abuses of migrant workers.

Rights violations have also been linked to some of Saudi Arabia's most high-profile megaprojects, including the NEOM region, an economic zone and new city on the Red Sea that is being erected from scratch. Rights organizations have documented that Saudi authorities forcibly evicted members of the Huwaitat community, which has inhabited Tabuk for centuries, from the project area, arrested those who protested their evictions, and killed one protesting resident.

In November 2024, Salam for Democracy and Human Rights submitted a freedom of information request to the U Department for Business and Trade requesting details on which "elements of human rights law and practice and what specific aspects of the human rights records of GCC states did the UK take into consideration, given its policy to promote adherence by such states to international human rights standards, when concluding trade negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council states." The Department did not respond to the specific questions.

Providing incentives for increased trade with Gulf countries without first ensuring significant human rights improvements and benchmarks in any agreement may seriously undermine human rights.



The UK government should ensure that:

There is an independent human rights and environmental impact assessment before an agreement is signed;

The agreement excludes investor-state dispute settlement provisions, which grant investors the right to sue states, that could negatively affect human rights;

Any agreement contains enforceable human rights obligations on businesses and investors in all the countries;

Any agreement includes provisions for transparent, independent monitoring and enforcement of human rights provisions in all GCC countries and in the UK;

The agreement would not rely solely on “domestic advisory groups,” a specially created consultative body consisting of domestic civil society organizations and local human rights experts, to monitor human rights compliance with the agreement, document violations, and press the government to address abuses. Relying solely on domestic groups would be ineffective, given the severe repression across the region and the history of reprisals against domestic groups and individuals who speak out across the GCC, including, for example, Ahmed Mansoor in the UAE, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja in Bahrain, and Waleed Abu al-Khair in Saudi Arabia.

It enacts comprehensive legislation requiring UK entities that conduct business abroad that requires them to conduct mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence, consistent with the UK Parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights recommendations.

It ratifies the Migrant Workers Convention as soon as possible and fully incorporates and implements the rights contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in domestic law, including ensuring an effective remedy for those whose rights have been violated, and rectify areas in which its commitment to human rights law and standards has weakened at home.

The UK government engages urgently with independent, Gulf and UK-focused human rights and democracy organizations the ensure that the trade agreement adheres to the spirit and letter of international human rights law.

In June, the British government released its trade strategy, which promises to “help protect British businesses from such risks by championing international standards and frameworks on human rights, environment, and corruption working to support a level playing field.”

In June 2022, while in opposition, the Labour Party strongly criticized the Conservative Government's decision to drop human rights and the rule of law from its negotiations on a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The then-Labour shadow international trade secretary stated: "We have a government acting as though human rights and the rule of law are optional extras, to be discarded at will, rather than principles and values that are fundamental to what we stand for as a country," adding: "It is wrong, it is immoral, and it is doing untold damage to our reputation around the world." We now call on the Government to honor this commitment.

A trade agreement needs to ensure concrete improvements on human rights, particularly labor rights, to avoid the risks of UK complicity in rights abuses for British businesses in GCC countries and beyond.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet and discuss these issues further.

Signed

