

Construction is one of the most dangerous jobs in Kuwait, with the sector's injuries and accidental deaths comprising nearly half of all worker injuries in the country, *Kuwait Times* reported in March.

Data collected from Kuwait's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MSAL) as part of the report stated the most common injuries on construction sites in Kuwait are bone fractures (52.6%), wounds (17.5%), and bruises (14.5%), and around 0.8% of these injuries lead to deaths.

A case study by Dr Hanouf M Al-Humaidi and F Hadipriono Tan – based on MSAL data – revealed Kuwaiti site safety standards fall short of their international counterparts.

The situation isn't much better in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, where construction workers were most impacted by work-related accidents in the first nine months of 2015. Up to 50,000 construction labourers – 95% of them non-Saudis – met with accidents while on the job, according to *Arab News*, citing data issued by the Kingdom's General Organization for Social Insurance.

Clearly, the state of health, safety, and environment (HSE) standards in both of these countries must be improved to ensure labour welfare in their construction sector. The rate of HSE investments has unarguably increased in the GCC on the back of government initiatives and private sector participation. However, it wouldn't be altogether presumptuous to suggest the region's construction sector has a long way to go before it can relax its HSE efforts.

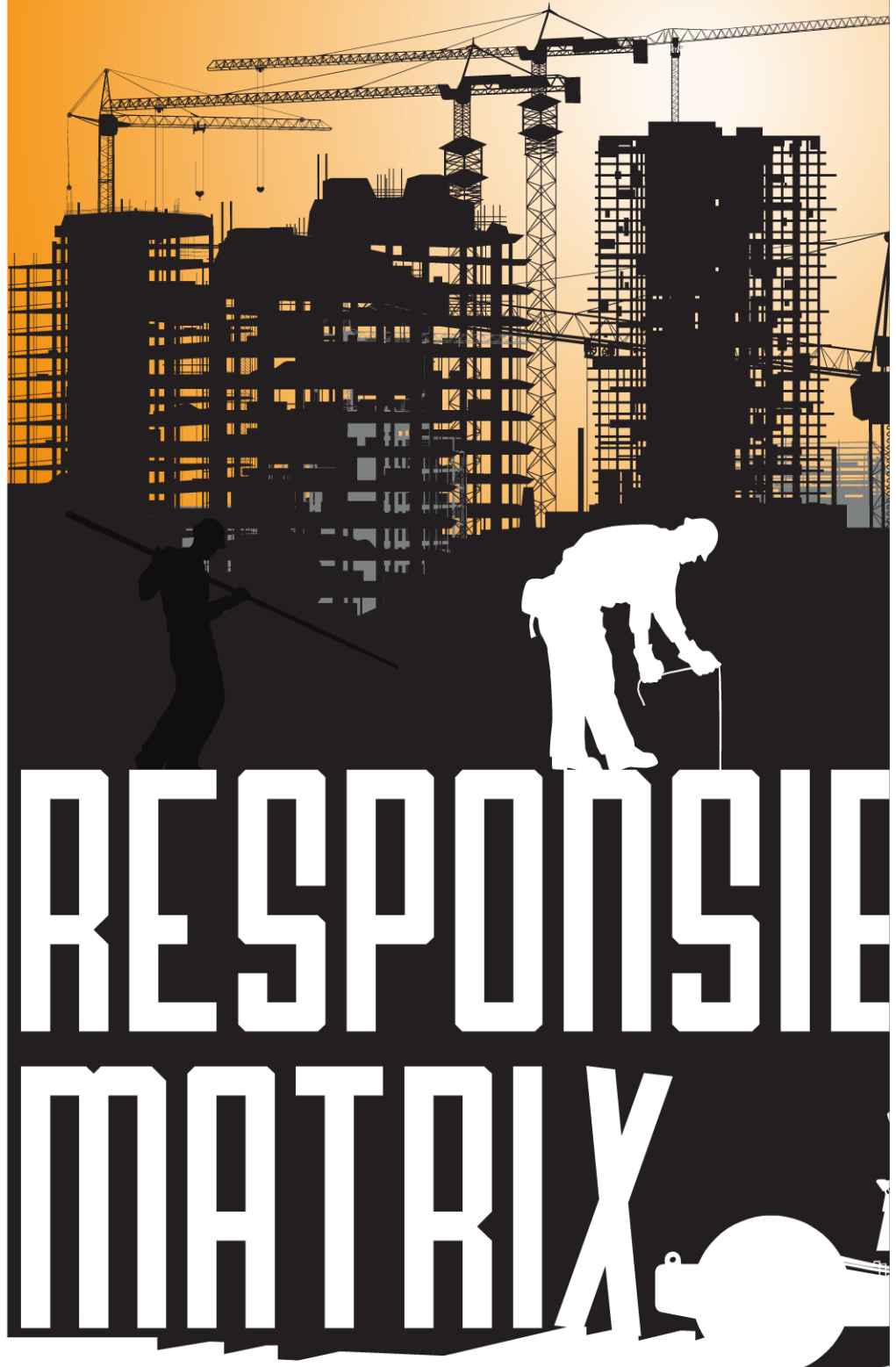
Qatar appears to understand this. The host of the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup tournament said in January that it would swap its infamous kafala system for labour contracts within the year. According to *Al Sharq*, the new law would also help to regulate the entry and exit of expatriates.

However, International Labour Organisation (ILO) officials, following a tour of stadium construction sites this March, asserted that Qatar's labour law amendments would not bear instant results.

In its report, the ILO mission said it “acknowledges the recent concrete measures taken by the government and other interlocutors” it met in Qatar to improve migrants' working conditions.

“Certain challenges remain, and the implementation of the measures to overcome them are still underway,” the report added.

GCC health, safety, and environment experts talk to **Neha Bhatia** about the roadblocks encountered by their onsite labour welfare strategies





“The contractor [carries out] the project and, therefore, it is his responsibility that his workers are properly protected. Unless the government assigns one officer on each site, how can it be responsible for onsite activities?” Mohammed Jindran, OLS

Mohammed Jindran, managing director of Overseas Labour Supply (OLS), agrees with this view, adding Qatar will require a longer timeframe to boost its HSE standards. Speaking to *Construction Week*, Jindran hails the UAE's wage protection system (WPS) as the ideal method to eliminate payment delays and infractions, adding Qatar's mechanism could do well to aspire towards the UAE's model.

He continues: “Qatar's WPS was established very recently as compared to the UAE, and is yet to be implemented to the same level as the Emirates’. We don't have clear visions of how they're going about it, but the living conditions of workers may not be at the same level as the UAE.

“But there's definitely a vast difference between the HSE quality and general satisfaction of workers in the UAE and Qatar. Even recently, we've received complaints that workers aren't happy in the country.”

During its March tour, ILO's mission visited numerous construction sites in Qatar, including Khalifa Stadium, a key feature of the country's World Cup programme.

ILO's report said concerns raised by migrant workers “related to the payment of wages – non-payment, late payment and/

or reduction of agreed wages – passport confiscation, long hours of work, non-renewal of their identity cards by the employer, and difficulty in transferring sponsorship”.

Furthermore, the study reportedly added that thousands of migrant workers were in accommodation that fell short of minimum standards, with 10 to 12 workers frequently sharing one small room, and unhygienic and poor kitchen and sanitary facilities.

Such claims were echoed by workers of BK Gulf, who recently told UK newspaper the *Guardian* that “they have been exploited and mistreated by labour supply companies hired by the firms to furnish construction sites in Doha with cheap manual workers”. However, some BK Gulf labourers working at Qatar's national museum “praised [the] safety management on the site”, the report added.

Construction Week approached BK Gulf with questions regarding the labour supply companies in question, but is yet to receive a response from the contractor.

BK Gulf's worker situation pivots on a long-standing debate in the GCC's construction sector over who is accountable for the failure of HSE mechanisms? While some industry voices call for greater government responsibility with regards to labour



HYDRATION THERAPY

Ben Tarbox, export manager for Australian firm Aqualyte's Middle East operations, tells *Construction Week* plain water is likely to fall short in preventing dehydration in the region's construction sector.

“There's a lot of science supporting why water isn't enough, and why

electrolytes are required while working in summer months,” Tarbox says.

A good hydration drink, Tarbox explains, comprises electrolytes, and “small amounts of sugar”.

“When the workers sweat, their body goes out of balance from a fluid-retention perspective, and typically, you can't drink

enough water to [regain] those electrolytes,” Tarbox continues.

“The more we talk to companies, the better hydration strategies we chart out for them, both as standalone plans and as a part of their wider heat-management HSE practices. The key is education,” he concludes.



“Everyone’s got a responsibility towards safety, but human nature and local culture mean people often don’t do what they should be doing unless they’re told to, and are continually monitored.”

Mike Palmer, Rapid Access

welfare, some also assert onsite contractors must be held responsible for better worker management.

Mike Palmer, regional quality, health, safety, and environment (QHSE) and training manager at Rapid Access, offers an equitable view to solve the conundrum.

“Everyone’s got a responsibility towards safety, but human nature and local culture mean people often don’t do what they should be doing unless they’re told to, and are continually monitored,” he tells *Construction Week*.

“At Rapid Access, we have a standard HSE policy based on legislations as required in this part of the world, and in compliance with international standards. Based on the employers we’re engaged with, we look at how our teams should be trained and with what equipment, ensure they have the right personal protective equipment (PPE), and run a risk assessment based on their roles and the jobs they carry out,” Palmer continues.

“We don’t differentiate too much between depot and onsite HSE standards, because we’re looking to provide the same level of care, training, and knowledge. The focus on HSE should be the same.”

In-house HSE standards, Jindran echoes, reflect on a company’s onsite productivity and lost time injury (LTI) rates as well.



A COOLING-OFF PERIOD



Vice president of sales at Portacool, Bob Mangiaforte,

says the creation of cool spaces on construction sites can go a long way towards improving worker health and safety.

“Construction sites in the Middle East tend to be very hot, and workers need

cooling to de-stress,” he tells *Construction Week*.

“Some studies have shown productivity reduces by 16% once temperatures hit 34°C, and by 1% each degree thereon. In such a scenario, cooling solutions are the key to improving safety and productivity. Our units work on the evaporative cooling model,

unlike fans, which blow hot air around the area. On construction sites, you need ventilation and cool air.

“Because the units are portable, their total cost of ownership is also quite low – around \$0.82 to \$1.36 (AED3 to AED5) per day – and there’s no reluctance in the market to purchase our products,” he adds.

After all, he asserts, government involvement is predominantly an enforcement tool and, as such, must not be equated with active HSE mechanisms.

He explains: “Who carries out the project? The contractor does, and therefore, it is his responsibility that his workers are properly protected. Unless the government assigns one officer on each site, how can it be responsible for onsite activities?”

“Contractors have their own safety officers or managers who are responsible for HSE. These activities can also be outsourced to specialist labour management firms.

“I think the onus [for effective onsite HSE] is on the contractor [that] is the employer of the workers. The government shouldn’t have to take responsibility if, for instance, there’s a casualty on site, because the government isn’t manning the site,” Jindran adds.

As is the case in most growing economies, tangible industry changes can be affected through private sector resources. Certain GCC contractors, such as ALEC, exhibit a clear understanding of this dynamic, and of how they can contribute to safer construction sites, despite the challenges associated with developing one.

LABOUR PAINS



Marcus Taylor,
managing
partner at
Taylor Sterling,

says enforcement of labour law standards has generally improved across the GCC, with technology playing a key role in improving site inspections.

"Governments have boosted 'snap' [surprise] site inspections, and

heavy fines are handed out for infractions," Taylor tells *Construction Week*.

"Inspections have become high-tech of late, and it is now common to see a drone flying through construction sites both big and small as a part of these monitoring activities."

However, Taylor adds, the private sector's contribution to onsite

HSE implementation is of significance, and can vastly alter a project's overall safety quotient: "We've worked with a number of clients who have actually been involved in developing new industry standards set by the GCC government bodies.

"The deprecations of fatalities on site for private sector contractors can be nothing less than horrific."



Rapid Access focuses on high-quality HSE standards for those working at height.



"Challenges always vary. The introduction of [new] people

means they must all be trained about health and safety to the standards which ALEC sets."

Dennis Green, ALEC

Denis Green is the operations support manager of ALEC, which won health and safety honours at the *Construction Week* Awards 2015. Green says education forms the crux of solid HSE practices, and outlines ALEC's measures to boost employee safety.

"HSE training and development is conducted on the basis of a strategic, project-by-project analysis, identifying the specific requirements of each. For example, a high-rise project will require training on the dangers of working at height and how to avoid them," he tells *Construction Week*.

While "challenges always vary" where HSE implementation is concerned, Green says workforce demographics are quickly emerging as a key factor in the formulation of safety plans: "Currently, ALEC's HSE managers face the challenge of a relatively new workforce, as the business has grown significantly over the last year. The introduction of [new] people means they must all be trained about health and safety to the standards that ALEC sets."

Rapid Access's Palmer also highlights the impact staff education can have on improving HSE standards within a company: "What helps UAE workers is the media coverage of [legislative] changes – any employee can pick up the newspaper and learn about, for instance, labour law updates."

Working without appropriate PPE, such as hardhats and safety harnesses, is a 'sackable' offense at Rapid Access, Palmer says. However, he adds, the company is mindful of the environment its workers operate in and, as such, enforces PPE at its sites on a "task-specific" basis.

"We enforce PPE – like hardhats and safety glasses – when we're aware that something could fall or fly off. It's a hot climate and we know the dangers of dehydration, so we carry out an overall risk assessment of the situation as part of our HSE strategy.

"We want workers to understand the benefits of PPE and adopt its usage, instead of just using it because we put up a sign on the wall," Palmer concludes. **EW**



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