

## AI WEIWEI URGES GULF TO DO MORE TO HELP...

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Civilians fleeing Syria's nearby war have found scant refuge in the Arab world's richest countries despite several being backers of combatants in Syria's conflict, including Qatar. Gulf monarchies say they have in fact taken in hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens since the civil war there began in 2011, including half a million in Saudi Arabia and 100,000 in the United Arab Emirates - just not as refugees. Like the rest of the expatriates that form a majority in many Gulf States, Syrians have been admitted mainly as temporary guest workers, which generally means they must have jobs lined up before they arrive, or as their family dependents.

Gulf states also say the criticism also overlooks the billions

donated to Syrian refugee camps abroad, as well as the delicate demographics of countries where expatriate workers are as numerous as locals or outnumber them. Ai said the six Gulf Cooperation Council states - Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar - should sign the UN convention on refugees which has governed international law on asylum since World War Two.

"(Signing the convention) is not just to help but to testify that a state can understand what humanity is about," he said. "Because this is really a test of our humanity and willingness to defend those integrities of human life. It doesn't matter how rich you can be or how self-protected - if we cannot meet this challenge I think the future is very dark." — Reuters

## INDIAN FISHERMEN RECALL GULF ORDEAL

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"We are seeing increasing cases of fishermen being detained," said Josephine Valarmathi of the non-profit National Domestic Workers' Movement, based in Chennai. "Even as this lot of fishermen have returned, another 24 have been caught in the same circumstances and are now stranded. Most of them are not clear on what visa they have travelled or the terms and conditions of the workplace."

George said they were given very little food, forced to drink water from toilets, made to do sit ups and often went hungry. After being held in a prison in Iran for a few days, the fishermen were kept on their boats off the coast. "We were under constant watch," George said. "Sometimes we were given just one roti (bread) and survived on that all day. We earn our livelihoods from fishing but living on a boat under fear of death was not what we had signed up for."

A Maria Joseph Kennady said language was a barrier to understanding of what was going on. "We were forced into a prison for four days and then back on the boat. We were herded like cattle," Kennady said. Officials at the Iranian embassy in New Delhi declined to comment on the matter. According to the Tamil Nadu Migration Survey 2015, the first comprehensive study on emigration from the state, roughly

every tenth household has one or more workers abroad.

The survey showed that a migrant spends an average of 100,000 rupees (\$1,500) to secure a job overseas, with half going to recruitment agencies and the rest for visas and travel. The survey of 20,000 households also revealed that 39 percent of women and 21 percent of men who work abroad reported not receiving the promised wages. "Often workers get duped, can't deal with the work situation in the Gulf and come back in adverse circumstances, forgoing their income," said Bernard D'Sami, co-author of the migration survey. "They then get trapped in an unending cycle of debt that sometimes forces them to go back to the Gulf and work."

Paid on the basis of the catch they brought back from the sea, the fishermen said they were back home with no savings and big loans that needed to be paid back. The fishermen called for urgent action to prevent others suffering similar ordeals, including education campaigns about the risks of migration. "I didn't understand or assess the risks," said George, now worried about repaying the nearly 100,000 rupee loan he took out to get to Bahrain. "And nobody told me either. So many people dream of a Gulf job. The government needs to make sure it doesn't become a nightmare." — Reuters

## THREE OPPOSITION LAWMAKERS FILE TO GRILL...

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The grilling cites the increase in the prices of petrol and electricity, saying that it is well known that the hike in electricity prices was not based on scientific studies and even before the government succeeds in collecting hundreds of millions of dinars in unpaid bills. It said that the decided hike is highly exaggerated. It also said the hike in petrol prices and the increase in other charges will leave a negative impact on citizens.

Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said the grilling will be on the agenda of the April 25 regular session to decide when to debate it. The prime minister can ask for a delay if the Assembly agrees. Minister of Justice Faleh Al-Azeb however said that the government will study if the grilling is in line with the constitution and then

decide its next course of action. Two other opposition lawmakers, Riyadh Al-Adasani and Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, are scheduled to file a second grilling against the premier on Sunday. After debating the grilling, MPs may file a no-cooperation motion against the prime minister. To pass, the motion needs the support of 25 lawmakers. If approved, the matter will be sent to HH the Amir, who will decide whether to sack the prime minister or dissolve the Assembly and call for fresh elections.

In the Assembly session yesterday, MPs approved a criminal extradition treaty with Britain. It will help extradite the former chief of the social security institution who has been sentenced to jail for embezzling tens of millions of dinars. It also passed amendments to the corporate law to make it easier to set up commercial companies in the country.



Desert monkeys gather along Al-Hada Road that leads to the city of Taif, on the slopes of the Sarawat Mountains near the holy city of Makkah in Saudi Arabia yesterday. — AP

## AHMADINEJAD TO RUN FOR PRESIDENT IN SHOCK...

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Ahmadinejad lost the support of many mainstream conservatives during his contentious presidency, and some said yesterday that violating the supreme leader's advice was a final straw. "With today's move - registering for the presidential election, my belief in you was broken," ex-lawmaker and Ahmadinejad loyalist Mehdi Koochakzadeh wrote on social media. "End of Ahmadinejad," tweeted Elyas Naderan, another conservative former MP.

Analyst Farzan Sabet, a fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation in Stanford University, said his registration was indeed "shocking". But his motivation "may be to send an implicit threat to the Guardian Council that if they disqualify Baghaei - like they did his former chief-of-staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei in the 2013 presidential election - he will go back on his pledge and run for president," said Sabet.

He added that the Guardian Council would find it hard to disqualify Ahmadinejad, a two-time president who previously had the firm support of conservatives and the supreme leader. "Although it is quite possible that Ahmadinejad will be disqualified by the Guardian Council, this could turn out to be politically messy for them," said Sabet. The conservatives have been struggling to unite

around a single candidate to challenge President Hassan Rouhani, who is expected to register in the coming days.

They held a mass meeting last week at which they shortlisted five candidates, who will be narrowed down to one before the vote, although some conservatives have already suggested they will run independently. Ebrahim Raisi, a judge who currently heads the powerful Imam Reza charitable foundation in the Shiite holy city of Mashhad, topped the shortlist. Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf was also on the list, but it remains unclear if he will make his third bid for the presidency.

Rouhani has stabilized the economy and ended some sanctions through a 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. But many Iranians are frustrated by the continued lack of investment in the economy and a jobless rate that remains at 12 percent. Rouhani's administration argues it inherited a devastated economic landscape - the result of Ahmadinejad's populist policies that included monthly cash handouts and ill-fated housing projects.

But these policies have also ensured Ahmadinejad, 60, retains considerable popularity, particularly among the poor, potentially undermining attempts by conservatives to unite their base around a mainstream candidate. If Ahmadinejad is allowed to run, "he would likely draw more votes away from conservative candidates than from Rouhani," said Sabet. — AFP

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