



Businesses across the Middle East must put human rights above the bottom line

New report lifts the lid on the business practices of dozens of companies operating across the Middle East

London, 10 Dec 2013 – Companies operating across the Middle East must uphold human rights according to a new report by an international human rights organisation.

[The new report](#), released today in Arabic, English and French by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre to mark Human Rights Day, looks at how Middle Eastern companies and international firms operating in the region across a range of sectors are meeting – and failing to meet – their responsibility to respect the human rights of workers and communities.

The report highlights positive steps taken by some companies, such as an initiative by the founder of delivery company Aramex and involving telecommunications firm Zain, in Jordan, to generate youth employment. Efforts by recruitment agency Glowork to empower women in the workplace in Saudi Arabia and beyond, and strong policies and practices for migrant workers in Qatar implemented by construction firm OHL and aluminium smelting firm Qatalum were also singled out to be strong examples of good practice.

But the new report also flags a string of abuses, including the alleged involvement in torture by private security firms in Iraq; the creation of pollution that harms the right to health; and the denial of workers' freedom of association. Cases in the briefing include a protest against Orange in Jordan, alleging it helped the government temporarily shut down 300 online news websites; allegations that Saudi Aramco dismissed workers for participating in political protests; and concerns that companies involved in the Bahrain Grand Prix were turning a blind eye to human rights abuses by the Bahrain government.

Executive Director of the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre Phil Bloomer said: *“For too long, human rights have been ignored by too many businesses operating in the Middle East and North Africa. Sacking female employees for being pregnant or failing to pay migrant workers for months of labour are things that we still see too frequently.*

“But there is hope that the tide is turning, and scrutiny of business conduct is on the rise in many countries. There are now international guidelines on human rights that apply to the private sector. Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia were on the UN Human Rights Council when it unanimously endorsed the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in 2011; and Jordan and Turkey co-sponsored the resolution endorsing them. Urgent action by companies and governments is necessary.”

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre has been tracking reports on companies' human rights impacts since 2003. If a company has not yet responded to allegations from civil society, it first invites the company for a response before disseminating the concerns. To date, it has approached companies operating in the Middle East and North Africa 147 times and the response rate is nearly 70 per cent overall. (see notes for editors below for further details).

Bloomer says this indicates an encouraging level of engagement by many companies on human rights issues – but too many are still choosing to remain silent.

Allegations related to a broad range of issues such as restrictions on the freedom of speech; the sale of arms used for human rights abuses; the selling of surveillance software – and attacks on privacy; migrant labourers' working conditions and abuses by private security companies.

Rania Fazah, Middle East Researcher for Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and a co-author of the report, says: *“While the international spotlight is, understandably, on the situation of migrant workers in Qatar, we are keen to show that human rights issues connected with business in the Middle East affect many other sectors too.*

“With increased scrutiny coming from all angles, companies can no longer say that they are unaware of their human rights responsibilities. Prudent companies will realize that it makes business sense to avoid being directly or indirectly involved in abuses.”

The report ends with specific recommendations to companies and to governments in the region. The Resource Centre says there are several basic, practical first steps that could be taken by companies wanting to prioritise avoiding abuses.

These include implementing ethical recruitment procedures and adhering to international labour rights standards. The organization is also calling on companies operating in the technology and media sectors – key for enabling freedom of information in the region – to act in accordance with principles of access and freedom of expression; respect for privacy; and non-repression.

The report also highlights how governments have an important role to play in ensuring companies – both private and state-owned – uphold human rights. Its recommendations to governments include enacting and enforcing laws to ensure that companies in their territory do not abuse human rights; encouraging their firms overseas to respect human rights; enhancing freedoms of expression and association; and strengthening protections for workers.

ENDS

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2. To arrange an interview with Rania Fazah in Beirut contact Rania at: +961 70178778 / fazah@business-humanrights.org.
3. The full briefing paper can be downloaded from here: <http://www.business-humanrights.org/Documents/Regionalbriefings>
4. Seventy-one per cent of companies outside the region (out of 102 approaches) responded to human rights concerns when approached by the Resource Centre – such as Mondelez, Shell and Siemens – and 58 per cent of MENA-based firms (out of 45 approaches), such as Century Miracle Apparel (Jordan), Al-Hamad (United Arab Emirates) and MTV Lebanon (see briefing paper and [Annex](#) for full list).
5. About the Resource Centre: Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, an independent non-profit organization, provides the leading information hub on business & human rights: www.business-humanrights.org.

The website tracks reports about the human rights impacts (positive & negative) of over 5000 companies in over 180 countries, and provides guidance tools and resources for all those working in this field. Its researchers are based in Brazil, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Senegal, South Africa, UK, Ukraine and USA.

Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and President of Ireland, is Chair of the Centre's International Advisory Network. The Centre does not accept funding from companies or company foundations, in order to maintain its independence and to prevent any possible perception of a conflict of interest.

Mission: To encourage companies to respect and promote human rights, and avoid harm to people. The Resource Centre does this by advancing:

- **Transparency** – pursuing, collecting and disseminating to a global audience information about company conduct, positive and negative;
- **Public accountability** – helping civil society get companies to address concerns; seeking responses and drawing attention to each company's response or failure to respond; and
- **Informed decision-making** – providing the leading business & human rights resource and guidance hub, to assist civil society, companies and others.

Further information about the Resource Centre's work is available here: www.business-humanrights.org/Aboutus.

All companies mentioned in the briefing

(note: some are referred to because of alleged abuses, others because of positive initiatives they are taking)

Abdulla Nass	Daoud & Partners	Ooredoo
Accenture	Emirates	Orange
Adidas	Etihad	Orascom
Africa Israel	Etisalat	PepsiCo
Ahava	Evoca	Procera Networks
Al Asfoor	Facebook	Qatalum
Al Hamad	FSI Worldwide	Qatar Airways
Alcatel-Lucent	G4S	Rosoboronexport
Alstom	Glowork	Saudi Aramco
Amesys	Google	Saudi Star Development
Anglo American	GP Zachariades	Company
Aramex	Helwan Fertilizers	SEKEM
AT&T	KBR	Senior Group
BAE Systems	Lebanese Family Club	Sjovik
Bank Audi	LINKdotNet	Spinneys
BLC Bank	Manpower	Suez Steel
Blue Coat	Marks & Spencer	Telecom Egypt
CACI	Mazaya Investment Group	TeliaSonera
Carrefour	Mekorot	Tesco
Century Miracle Apparel	Microsoft	Veolia
Chemical Industries	Millicom	Villaggio
Development	Mondelez	Vodafone
Citi	MTV Lebanon	Websense
Computerlinks FZCO	Noor Group	Yahoo!
Co-operative Group	OHM	Zain