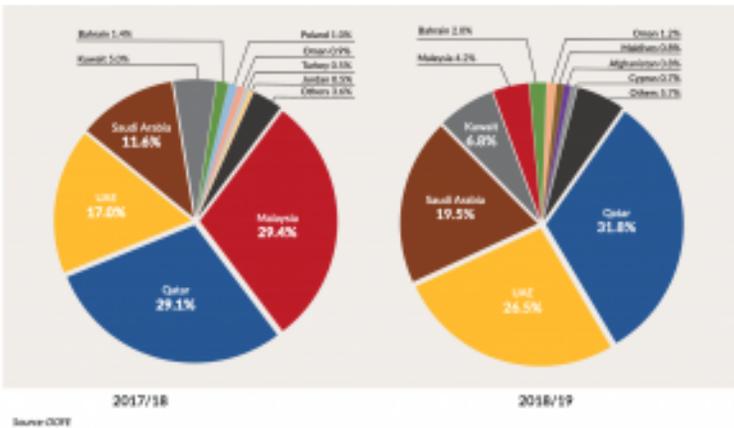

DROPPING DEAD

Qatar's death certificates for
migrant workers are a
template for denial

MIGRANT-RIGHTS.ORG

REPORT BY PRAMOD ACHARYA
DECEMBER 2021

MIGRANT-RIGHTS.ORG



Roughly 230,000 Nepali migrant workers headed to the GCC states in 2018/19 alone, with the majority concentrated in Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi. Qatar was the top destination for Nepali migrant workers, employing roughly 30% of all incoming Nepali workers abroad in the same period. This

report focuses on Qatar for reasons of access. It is critical to underscore that Nepal's 2020 Labour Report indicates that high rates of unexplained deaths have occurred in several destination countries, most notably in Saudi Arabia.

"This will be my last time working in this country," Sukram Tharu said to his wife Rita on a video call from Qatar on a Friday night in April 2020. Before going to bed, he promised, "I will return home after a year and stay with you."

But his promise will never be realized. Later that night, Sukram had suddenly complained of sharp pain in his chest. His fellow workers immediately called an ambulance, but it was already too late. He took his last breath in a cramped room in one of the wealthiest countries on earth – Qatar.

Qatar's Public Health Department attributed his death to "acute heart failure due to natural causes." But his wife is befuddled by his strange demise. "Just a few hours earlier, I saw him totally fine," Rita said. "I don't understand what happened to him. How could he die that way?"

To her knowledge, Sukram, 35, had no health ailments. Nor was he taking any medication. He was medically "fit" and did not have heart disease, either, according to his pre-departure medical examination report.

After the death of the family's sole breadwinner, their 13-year-old son dropped out of school. He began working as a labourer in his hometown in the Bardiya district of Nepal.

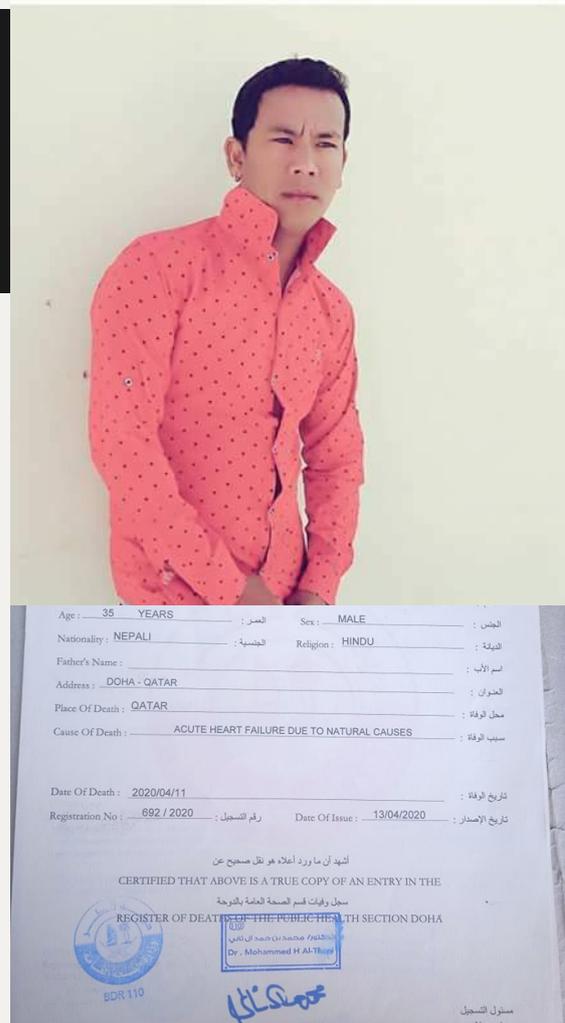
SUKRAM THARU, 35

CAUSE AS PER DEATH CERTIFICATE: ACUTE HEART FAILURE DUE TO NATURAL CAUSE

Sukram worked as a rigger in Qatar for over six years. One night in April 2020, he suddenly shouted out, complaining of pain in his chest. He died before he could be taken to the hospital. His wife Rita learned of his death four days later, only when his co-worker called her.

According to his work permit, he was employed by Future Engineering Company WLL. Although he was promised a salary of QR1500, Rita says he was paid only QR800. She received NPR 100,000 (US\$840) from the Foreign Employment Board and NPR 700,000 (US\$590) from a Nepalese insurance company. But his employer in Qatar paid no compensation.

After the death of her husband, a representative of the Foreign Employment Board contacted her and asked for her consent to perform the final rites of the deceased in Qatar. But as her family and tradition dictate that a person be brought back to his home to carry out a funeral as soon as possible, she denied the request. As all flights were closed due to Covid-19, she only received her husband's body after three months of death.

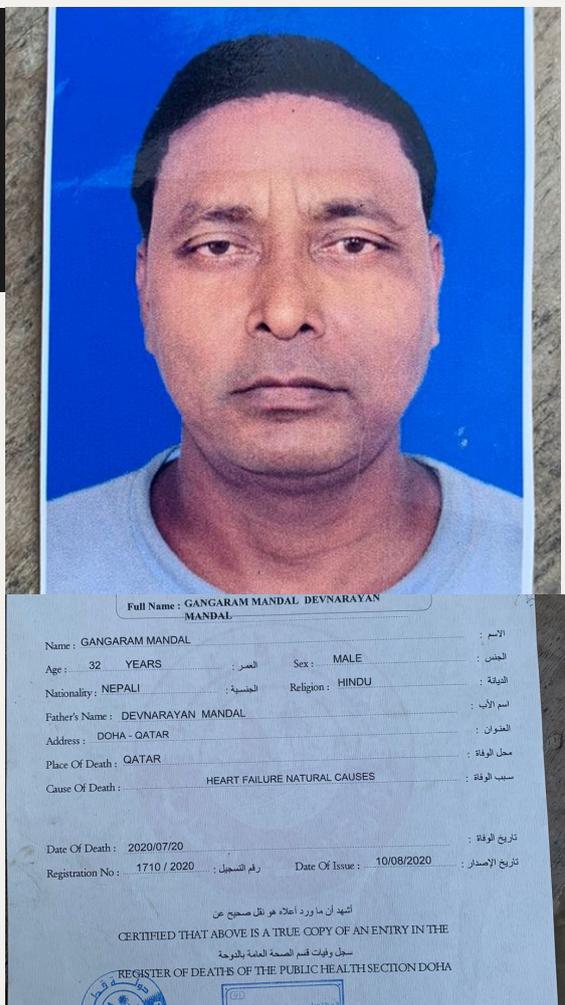


GANGARAM MANDAL, 34

CAUSE AS PER DEATH CERTIFICATE: HEART FAILURE [DUE TO] NATURAL CAUSE

Gangaram Mandal was a skilled mason from southern Nepal. He worked in construction in his hometown, but he didn't earn enough to support his wife, seven daughters, and son, especially in their impoverished village where dowry systems remain deeply entrenched. As the sole breadwinner for his family of ten, he left for Qatar in July 2018 in the hope of earning more. He found work with Sahel Al-Khor Contracting & Building Maintenance Co. as a labourer.

One morning two years later, he simply didn't wake up. "He had no conditions," his wife said. "How could his death be natural?" Gangaram's family has not received any compensation from the employer. According to his work permit, his salary was QR900, but his wife says he received far less in actuality. Gangaram's body arrived in Nepal after five weeks of his demise.



“Our other two – a daughter and a younger son – go to primary school, but I have trouble providing for them as I have no money,” said Rita, struggling to maintain her composure. “We had a dream of staying together in our newly built home. But he will never come back,” she added, with a choke in her voice.

Despite working in Qatar for more than six years, Sukram’s wife has not received any compensation from the employer. Nor has she received clarity as to the actual cause of Sukram’s death, as no post-mortem was conducted.

And it’s not only Sukram’s death that is mired in doubt.

An increasing number of Nepali migrant workers’ deaths in Qatar, and other destination countries have gone unexplained in recent years, with both Nepal and destination governments neglecting to ascertain the underlying causes.

Based on the deceased workers’ medical records, employment contracts, photographs, travel documents, and the testimonies from victims’ families, Migrant-Rights.org’s investigation reveals a grim picture of untimely and unexplained deaths. The deaths of young, medically “fit” migrant workers, often raise no questions, are categorised as ‘natural causes,’ and cases are closed without attempts to prevent future deaths.

The documents MR reviewed indicate that Qatar’s Public Health Department issued death certificates without carrying out any investigations to identify the real cause of death, even though these workers were in their 20s and 30s and certified healthy, in mandatory pre-departure tests, at the time of migration.

CAUSE OF DEATH BY YEAR

FISCAL YEAR	CAUSE OF DEATH							Total	
	CARDIAC ARREST	HEART ATTACK	NATURAL CAUSES	TRAFFIC ACCIDENT	SUICIDE	WORKPLACE ACCIDENT	OTHER CAUSES	M	F
	2008/09	26	2	24	8	9	6	15	87
2009/10	106	10	118	67	25	44	48	399	19
2010/11	100	48	118	60	62	61	100	541	8
2011/12	134	37	102	101	66	41	165	632	14
2012/13	116	32	106	104	81	27	261	716	11
2013/14	190	79	138	112	96	79	194	864	24
2014/15	268	90	247	121	113	113	54	1000	6
2015/16	148	94	246	103	109	81	32	789	24
2016/17	64	64	252	122	89	61	103	737	18
2017/18	72	114	126	127	132	67	184	801	21
2018/19	86	33	136	115	111	62	210	730	23
Total	1310	603	1613	1040	893	642	1366	7296	171

Source: FEB

CAUSE OF DEATH BY COUNTRY

COUNTRY	CAUSE OF DEATH						
	CARDIAC ARREST	HEART ATTACK	NATURAL CAUSE	TRAFFIC ACCIDENT	SUICIDE	WORKPLACE ACCIDENT	OTHER CAUSES
MALAYSIA	330	169	231	118	240	184	184
SAUDI ARABIA	105	59	579	465	102	140	140
QATAR	489	79	114	88	87	119	119
UAE	136	53	90	67	74	29	29
KUWAIT	7	64	14	30	21	5	5
OMAN	4	2	15	9	9	3	3
BAHRAIN	12	3	33	13	6	7	7

Deaths by causes and by countries over the years (Source; Nepal Migration Report 2020)

Notification of deaths is also a haphazard process, with neither the employer nor the embassy efficient, or the first, in contacting next of kin. Instead, when workers who otherwise speak to their families almost daily cease communication for a few days, the families then call their co-workers — and that phone call is often how they find out about the passing of a loved one.

Between 2008 and 2019, a total of at least 1,095 Nepali migrant workers died in Qatar, which is nearly one-third of the total deaths that occurred across the Gulf countries, [according to Nepal's Foreign Employment Board](#), the government entity responsible for the welfare of migrant workers.

MOHAMMAD SALAUDDIN, 24

CAUSE AS PER DEATH CERTIFICATE: CARDIAC ARREST

Mohammad Salauddin had gone to Qatar in 2018, leaving his newly married and pregnant wife Madina in Nepal. He worked as a cleaner for Life Style For Cleaning and Maintenance, earning QR900 (US\$250), according to his employment contract.

One day in April 2021, he went to the washroom to launder his clothes and never returned, according to colleagues who found him on the floor and reported his death to his family.

His pre-departure medical examination report stated that he was physically and mentally "fit" with a normal clinical impression. His family still has not received any compensation from the employer. His wife Madina and mother Nunu are confused about the circumstances of his death. They received Saluddin's body two weeks of his death.



Ref No : 77599*
Date : 11/04/2021

شهادة تحنيط
EMBALMING AND SEALING CERTIFICATE

Name : MD SALAUDDIN MD NASIR
Age and Sex : 24 YEARS / MALE
Nationality : NEPALI
Date Of Death : 02/04/2021
Cause Of Death : CARDIAC ARREST

This Certifies that the body of the above named has been completely embalmed and will be free from decomposition for a period of one week.
The body is placed in a metal container which has been completely sealed and is airtight.

هذا يشهد ان جثمان المذكور اسمه اعلاه قد حفظ وسيكون خال من التلف لمدة اسبوع واحد.
وقد وضع الجثمان داخل وعاء معنني مزدهر ومحكم السد.

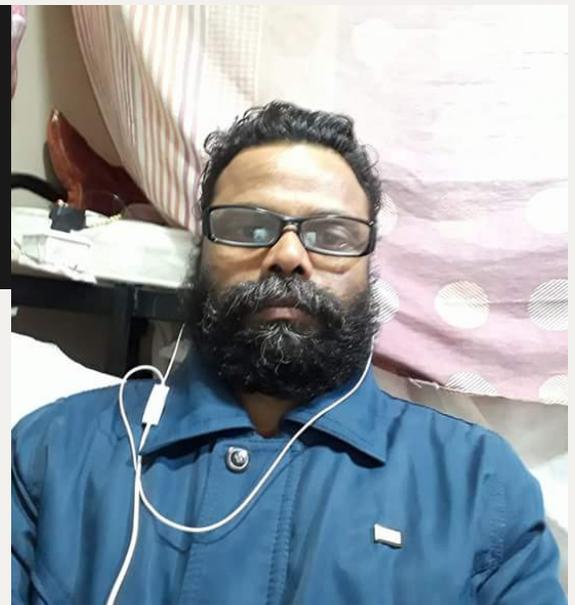
RAJENDRA PRASAD MANDAL, 48

CAUSE AS PER DEATH CERTIFICATE: MULTIPLE BLUNT INJURIES DUE TO FALL FROM HEIGHT

Rajendra Kumar Mandal from Nepal's Saptari district, went to Qatar in 2018. His family paid around NPR 100,000 to a recruitment agency to get him there. His work permit indicates he was a heavy vehicle driver employed by the Reliable Transport Contracting Services and earned QR3500 a month.

But his son, Ramsagar Mandal, contradicts the documents. "My dad worked in a construction site, as a marble foreman," said Ramsagar. "He would get much less salary than he was told... around NPR40,000 (QR1200)."

In March 2020, Rajendrra fell from the roof of the building he was working on, according to his colleagues. After his demise, his wife received no compensation from Qatar, except his unpaid salary and end of service benefits (NPR250,000). Rajendra's family, who were informed about his death by a Nepali co-worker, received his body after nearly three months.



شهادة تحنيط
EMBALMING AND SEALING CERTIFICATE

Name : RAJENDRA PRASAD MANDAL
Age and Sex : 48 YEARS / MALE
Nationality : NEPALI
Date Of Death : 31/03/2020
Cause Of Death : MULTIPLE BLUNT INJURIES DUE TO FALL FROM HEIGHT

This Certifies that the body of the above named has been completely embalmed and will be free from decomposition for a period of one week.
The body is placed in a metal container which has been completely sealed and is airtight.

هذا يشهد ان جثمان المذكور اسمه اعلاه قد حفظ وسيكون خال من التلف لمدة اسبوع واحد.
وقد وضع الجثمان داخل وعاء معنني مزدهر ومحكم السد.

Dr. Mohammed H Al-Thani

Criteria for autopsy

The [Law No 2 of 2012 on Autopsy of Human Bodies](#) prohibits autopsies except in the case of a crime. This law repealed [Law No 8 of 2003 Autopsy of Human Corpses](#), which had provisions that would have permitted better investigations into suspicious or unexplained deaths. As per the earlier law, autopsies were permitted for “medical reasons to help establish the cause of death, which may be otherwise unclear...”

*This section was updated on 17/12/2021 to reflect changes in legislation.

“The actual figure of workers’ deaths must be at least higher than they reported because it only incorporates the deaths of workers whose families received compensation,” said Yubraj Nepal, a co-founder of the Center for Migration and International Relations (CMIR), a non-profit organisation established by returnee migrant workers. “And the Board’s data excludes the deaths of undocumented workers because they cannot apply for the compensation as per Nepali law.”

The Nepali Embassy in Qatar that tracks all deaths did not provide the data but did respond via email to MR that they were currently processing the repatriation of three bodies.

Although the figures shared by different organisations on workers' deaths vary slightly, they all indicate that the majority died of "cardiac arrest," "heart failure," and "natural cause" – terms that describe the "terminal event" or manner of death but do not specify the underlying cause.

In a recent report, [Amnesty International accused](#) Qatari authorities of having "failed to properly investigate" workers' deaths, thereby making it difficult to determine the underlying causes of deaths, and "precluding any assessment of whether they are work-related."

"For medical professionals, what triggers cardiac arrest or heart failure is important," said Dr Megnath Dhimal, the senior research officer at the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC). "Saying 'due to natural causes' literally doesn't mean anything."

In Qatar's case, it could be related to working conditions, or it could even be a result of extreme heat stress as labourers work in high temperatures without drinking enough water, he added.

Some of the workers themselves had reported heat stress at their workplace before they died. Sukram, who worked on oil rig maintenance in Qatar, often told his wife that he had to work in the blazing heat. "He would say that his job was difficult, but he had to do it as he had no alternative," Rita said.

Gangaram Mandal, 34, from the Saptari district of south-eastern Nepal, also worked under the scorching sun at a construction site. In July 2020, he died in his sleep. The death certificate, predictably, states "heart failure [due to] natural cause," but his family members suspect he was worked to death.

“His health was excellent, and he had never taken any medicine related to the heart,” according to Laduwati Devi Mandal, Gangaram’s wife. “But I know he would work throughout the day in Qatar, no matter if it was sweltering hot.”

[A 2019 International Labour](#) Organisation (ILO) report has also found that migrant labourers working outdoors in Qatar are exposed to “high” or “extreme” heat stress levels. The study revealed that one-third of the workers interviewed experienced dehydration and hyperthermia at some point.

‘Cardiac arrest’: Number one cause

Over a phone conversation just a day before his death, Mohammad Salauddin, 24, told his wife that he was planning to return home soon. His wife Madina Khatun recounted her last talk with her husband, sitting on the porch of a shabby wooden house in the Saptari district of Nepal.

“He seemed very excited, hoping to meet his daughter for the first time. But now it will never happen,” she looked at the only photo of her husband on her mobile, tears streamed down her cheeks.

Salauddin’s death left Madina a widow at 22, with a two-year-old daughter who has never met her father and a predatory debt that she has no idea how to pay off. “It’s our misfortune that he won’t be with us any more,” said Khatun, who lived with him only for six months.

With no source of income at home, Salauddin had gone to Qatar with the hope of earning a decent salary, leaving behind his pregnant wife. In August 2018, he began working as a cleaning labourer. Three years later, he died. The death certificate states “Cardiac arrest” as the cause of death. This is difficult for the family to accept.

“He had never reported any health issues, never fallen sick. He was strongly built and young. I don’t think he could die of a heart problem,” said Salauddin’s mother Nunu Khatun, sobbing.

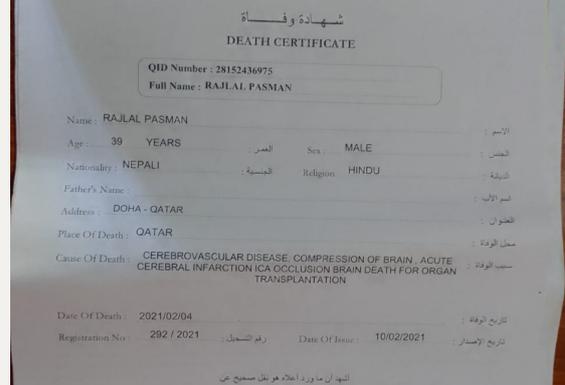
RAJLAL PASMAN, 40

CAUSE AS PER DEATH CERTIFICATE: CEREBROVASCULAR DISEASE, COMPRESSION OF BRAIN, ACUTE CEREBRAL INFRACTION ICA OCCLUSION BRAIN DEATH FOR ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION*

Rajlal Pasma had worked in Qatar for about three years, and booked a return flight to Nepal in February 2021. But barely a week before his scheduled departure, he was trapped in a gas leak fire at his workplace. As the fire spread, he fled for his life and was severely injured, according to Rajlal's uncle Shovit Pasma, who received his body in Nepal. "I heard from his friend that some co-workers were evacuated, but he died in a hospital." His employer was Al Muttaqin Trading Cleaning & Contracting Company, according to a letter issued by Nepali embassy.

Despite losing his life due to a workplace accident, his family received no compensation. They only received his unpaid salary (NPR 312,000). He had paid NPR 160,000 to recruitment agents for the job in Qatar. "Now it's very hard to pay his debt as no one in his family has a source of income," says Rajlal's brother, Gaya. Rajlal's family was informed about his death five days later by his Nepali co-workers. His body was repatriated roughly three weeks after his death, according to Qatar Airways' consignment note.

*Despite mention of organ transplantation on this death certificate, the family is not aware of any details this entails

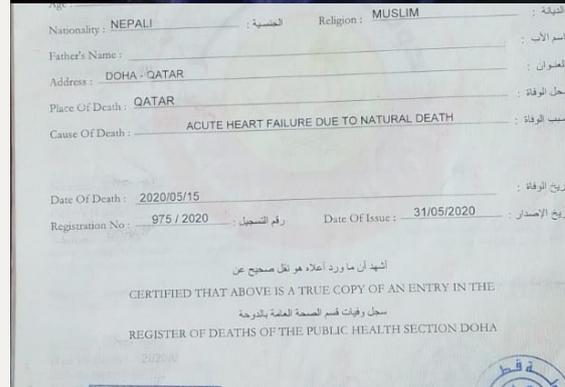


MOHAMMAD ZIYUL HAQUE, 38

CAUSE AS PER DEATH CERTIFICATE: ACUTE HEART FAILURE

Mohammad Ziyul Haque was a madrasa teacher in a small Nepali town. Like others, he moved to Qatar in 2018 for better financial prospects. In May 2020, soon after having dinner, he fainted and fell down from a chair, according to his brother Samir Alam. His colleagues took him to hospital where he was pronounced dead, and were the ones to inform his family of his passing.

But "no abnormality [was] detected" in his cardiovascular test and his health condition was "fit," according to his pre-departure health examination report. During the examination, no history of serious illness and surgery was found. He also did not have any psychological issues such as epilepsy or depression. According to his job contract, he was employed and provided accommodation by the Quick Solution Trading, Contracting and Cleaning company as a driver. His salary was stated to be QR2200. "But he would work as a cashier in a laundry and earned less than that," said Samir. Ziyaul's body was shipped to Nepal after six weeks of his death, according to Nepal Airlines' air waybill.



Among the documents that Salauddin's family received along with his corpse, there is no post-mortem report.

Nepal's Foreign Employment Act is silent on the investigation of Nepalis' death abroad, while [Nepal's Criminal Procedure Code](#) does not clearly describe whether its provisions regarding post-mortem apply to migrant worker cases. Nepal's existing laws lack clarity over how to conduct post-mortem or autopsy, or any investigation whatsoever into deaths of migrant workers abroad. The Code states, in case of homicide, suicide and unusual situations, the investigation authority shall immediately go to the place where the corpse is located, examine the corpse, and send it to a doctor for post-mortem.

"However, to my knowledge, there is no example of conducting an autopsy of the migrant workers in Nepal who died abroad," said Anurag Devkota, a human rights advocate who works at Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice.

"Cardiac arrest" was the leading cause of death reported among Nepali migrant workers in Qatar between 2008 and 2019, accounting for 45% (489 workers) of total Nepali deaths in the country, [according to Nepal's Labour Migration Report](#). In 2019, [a study by a group of climatologists and cardiologists](#) examined the link between Nepali workers deaths and heat exposure in Qatar. They concluded that heatstroke was a likely cause of cardiovascular fatalities.

And though 'cardiac arrests' occurring in accommodation comprise a significant percentage of worker deaths, these are not classified as workplace fatalities and therefore are neither investigated nor compensated. However, Article 3 of the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) redefines the workplace to include "places where the worker is paid, takes a rest break or a meal, or uses sanitary, washing and changing facilities" and "employer-provided accommodation." Still, the recently released ILO report on occupational injuries in Qatar (see sidebar) does not include these deaths in its analysis.

Neither compensation nor communication

While bereaved families in Nepal are struggling to survive in the absence of breadwinners, the reluctance of Qatari authorities to investigate deaths also deflects from their responsibility to pay compensation.

When deaths are attributed to 'natural causes' or otherwise deemed unrelated to work, employers in Qatar are not obliged to pay compensation, said Barun Ghimire, a human rights lawyer and the program manager of the Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice, an organisation that works on migrant rights issues.

Nor are they obliged to conduct post-mortems in the case of 'natural deaths,' unless the death is related to crime (see sidebar on autopsy laws). The refusal to pay compensation has dire consequences.

For example, despite losing his life in 2021 working in a foreign land, the family of Rajlal Paskan, 40, has not received any compensation yet. Rajlal's wife Palki Devi received just NPR 312,000 (US\$2,605) from Qatar after her husband's demise, but it was only his unpaid salary and end of service benefits.

"He was the only one employed in the family of five," said Gaya Paskan, brother of Rajlal. "Now, how can she repay the (NPR350,000) loan and continue her children's education? How can she fund her daughters' wedding?"

Palki Devi heard that she could claim compensation. But she hesitated to try as someone told her there is a lengthy and cumbersome bureaucratic procedure that one has to go through.

Most often, the victims' families are illiterate, and from remote villages. They simply do not know the procedures and are unable to prepare the paperwork, said Barun.

"Bringing the dead body to the home itself is a big deal for them. Who cares about their compensation?"

If any worker who has migrated abroad dies for any reason during the contract period, or no later than one year of the end of contract, the closest heir to the deceased may receive NPR 700,000 (US\$5,900) from the government upon the examination of the application, according to the [Foreign Employment Rules of Nepal](#).

But the family of Rajendra Prasad Mandal, 47, received no compensation – neither from Qatar nor in Nepal. “I don’t know why we didn’t get money,” said Rajendra’s son Ramsagar. “We don’t know what we need to do. No one helped us.”

And for the families of undocumented workers, getting compensation is only a dream.

They are not entitled to any financial assistance from the government because the [Foreign Employment Act](#) does not recognise those who go abroad via unofficial channels or those with expired work permits. And the Foreign Employment Rules are silent as to how to compensate their families.

“This creates troubles for the ones who reached abroad in pursuit of foreign employment via unofficial routes,” said Yubraj Nepal of the Center for Migration and International Relations. “Whether documented or undocumented, they have contributed to the nation through remittances, but the law discriminates against them.”

The bereaved families say they were not informed about the deaths of their loved ones in a timely manner, let alone able to receive compensation in a straightforward way. None interviewed during this reporting were informed of their kin’s death by the employer or Nepali embassy.

“I heard about my brother’s death only after five days when his friend called us,” said Gaya Pasman, brother to Rajlal, whose body was brought back to Nepal nearly three weeks after his death. (Repatriations normally take four to five days, according to the FEB, unless further investigation is required due to a murder or other crime).

With both information and repatriation of the body often delayed, the family's pain compounds. Family members usually get information from fellow workers or the media, instead of via any official channels, said Barun.

“The bereaved family has the right to know about the deaths immediately, and their body must return at earliest, but there is no proper chain of communication.”

Turning a deaf ear

Last year, [the Supreme Court of Nepal issued a mandamus order](#) requiring the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security to conduct a compulsory post-mortem of the migrant workers whose deaths were categorized as “sudden” or “natural.”

The court also asked Nepali state agencies – the Ministry of Labour, Department of Foreign Employment, and Foreign Employment Promotion Board – to abide by the provisions of the law regarding the minimisation of the risk of migrant workers’ death and their insurance, compensation, health examination, and pre-departure orientation, and repatriation.

“Even after the court order, things have not changed.” confessed lawyer Barun. “Young and healthy migrant workers continued to die and be abused.”

ILO's Qatar OSH report: Gaps in data collection identified, but no concrete measures on prevention of deaths

A [report released by ILO Qatar Office](#) in November 2021, drawing on data from the recently established Unified Registry for Workplace Injury Prevention in Qatar (WURQ), maintained that it was “currently not possible to safely present a categorical figure on the number of occupational injuries and fatalities” in the country.

Data for 2020 reveal that 50 fatalities were attributed to occupational injuries, and that there were 506 severe occupational injuries, with an average of 42.2 severe injuries per month. Severe occupational injuries were most commonly caused by falls, followed by road traffic injuries, falling objects and machinery.

WURQ reports that of the 50 deaths, 30 occurred pre-hospital (60%), and 20 occurred in hospital (40%). Most fatalities resulted from falls and road traffic injuries, and most occurred in the worksite.

The ILO's definition of occupational injury is: “any personal injury, disease or death resulting from an occupational accident”; and an occupational accident as an “unanticipated and unplanned occurrence[s] including acts of violence resulting from and in connection with work which cause one or more workers to incur a personal injury, disease or death”.

According to Qatar's Labour Law No. 14 of 2004 occupational injuries are: “...accident happening to the worker during the performance of his [or her] work or by reason thereof or during the period of commuting to and from his [or her] workplace, provided that there is no stoppage, lagging behind, or deviation from the normal route of commuting to and from the workplace.”