

# Diplomats welcome support for workers rights

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From The National UAE

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DUBAI // Embassies across the Emirates have warmly greeted the UAE's vote in favour of an international convention to safeguard the rights of domestic workers.

Representatives of foreign nations said the support for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) charter would mean better employment conditions for thousands of expatriate housemaids and nannies. However, some cautioned that the ILO recommendations would not be enforced immediately, and would take time to be implemented.

"It is a significant breakthrough," said Nasser Munder, the labour attache at the Philippine Embassy in Abu Dhabi.

There are 25,000 Filipino house workers in the country out of a total of 600,000 who form that nation's expatriate workforce in the UAE, he said.

"It follows that their problems, which include non-payment of wages, overwork and contract substitution, will be addressed," he said.

The UAE voted in favour of the ILO Convention 189 and Recommendation 201 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers at a conference of member states in Geneva on June 16.

Under the charter, workers will be given clearly defined conditions of employment before they start work, monthly salary payment in cash, a minimum of one day off a week and freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Embassy officials were also hopeful that the convention would tackle the issue of contract substitution. This happens when a second, inferior, labour contract to the signed original is presented to a worker, either before leaving their home country or after arriving in the UAE.

The majority of the Filipino household workers in the UAE earn Dh735 per month, half the minimum wage set by the Philippine government in December 2006, embassy officials said.

Judy Mercado, 27, a Filipina nanny who works for an Arab family in the capital, said the majority of Filipina housemaids and nannies work long hours, do not have a single day off, and are poorly paid.

"I'm glad something is done to improve our working conditions," she said.

She signed a contract with a monthly salary of Dh1,469, but is receiving only Dh750. She has not had a day off since she started work last July. She takes care of six children aged two to 10 years.

The convention also contains requirements for governments to regulate private employment agencies, investigate complaints, and prohibit the practice of deducting from staff wages to pay their recruitment fees.

Household workers are not covered by the labour law, and steps have been taken by the Philippine Embassy in Abu Dhabi to address the issue of contract substitution with immigration authorities.

Indonesian diplomats also welcomed the UAE's support of the new labour convention.

"We really appreciate that the UAE has voted to adopt the convention since 20 per cent of the household workers who seek refuge in our shelter complain of unpaid salaries," Wahid Supriyadi, the Indonesian ambassador in the UAE, said from Jakarta. Of the 100,000 Indonesian nationals in the Emirates, 75,000 are household workers.

Most complaints were about long working hours and contract substitution. Last August, Sutomo, the Indonesian Embassy's labour attache, said nationals were warned before they left for the Emirates that contracts signed in Jakarta were invalid.

Although officials in Indonesia are involved in preparing the original contracts, only those signed in the UAE are honoured.

The Indonesian embassy has been working with UAE officials to address the situation, such as creating a unified contract for its domestic workers, he said.

Sarath Wijesinghe, the Sri Lankan ambassador to the Emirates, said the convention would make a huge difference to the thousands of Sri Lankans employed in domestic work.

He called for a process of "harmonisation" of regulations involving domestic work contracts between different countries.

Nazmul Quaunine, Bangladesh's ambassador to the UAE, said the UAE Government had already taken steps to protect the welfare of labourers with the Wage Protection System.

"We welcome the UAE's decision to support the ILO convention as a positive step, but there are still processes that need to go through before it becomes enforceable," he said.

Dipak Adhikari, the deputy chief of mission at the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi, said the convention would help Nepalese domestic workers. Kathmandu lifted a 10-year-ban on domestic workers last December, allowing them to work as housemaids and nannies in the Gulf region. Despite a reversal of the ban, travel restrictions are yet to be removed