

UAE asserts commitment to fighting human trafficking

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is committed to fighting human trafficking wherever it occurs and would aggressively interdict those involved in it, says the first annual report of the UAE National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking.

The report, 'Combating Human Trafficking in the UAE 2007', has been released a year after the committee was formed, and highlights the country's stand on the crime, the efforts to counter it, the obstacles and challenges it has encountered, as well as plans for the future, according to the state-run Emirates News Agency (WAM).

The report, released ahead of the UAE's participation at the UN General Assembly debate on trafficking in New York in June, focuses on the measures taken since Federal Law 51 came into force in this Gulf nation.

The 16-article law, effective since November 2006, spells out stiff penalties against traffickers ranging from one year to life imprisonment and fines of 100,000 dirhams (\$27,225) and one million dirhams (\$272,250).

'At least 10 human trafficking-related cases were registered by the end of 2007 under the clauses of the new law,' the report stated.

'Notably, there were also convictions in at least five cases during this period, with the convicted receiving jail terms ranging from three to 10 years for committing, aiding or abetting human trafficking,' it added.

'The country's resolve to fight human trafficking at home and abroad in collaboration with international partners remains central to our counter-trafficking strategy,' the WAM report quoted UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash, who is also chair of the UAE National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking, as saying.

He added that General Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, has cemented this resolve with a generous donation to the UN's Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT) to establish an international network to fight human trafficking.

Gargash said the UAE was not ashamed to admit that the problem of trafficking afflicts this Gulf nation as it does many other countries.

It would be wrong, however, if immediate action was not taken once the crime was recognized, and the UAE was, therefore, pursuing an active and results-oriented strategy that aims to achieve immediate impact, he stated.

According to the report, the UAE's commitments under international law include becoming a signatory to three of the UN conventions on human rights - the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination; the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Stating that the UAE government has a healthy track record of providing assistance and protection to victims of sexual abuse, the report said the government was working with foreign governments and NGOs when cases are brought to its attention.

'Victims have been given protection and shelter while their paperwork is processed, and are then repatriated at the government's expense under the 'Crime Victim Assistance Programme',' it stated.

It said the Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children, an independent civil society institution established in Dubai in 2007, has assisted 115 women and children after they were designated as victims of a number of crimes including human trafficking, domestic violence, family neglect, employer abuse and other social problems.

'Of these, 28 are suspected victims of trafficking, 24 have been identified as adults and four have been identified as minors less than 18 years of age,' the report said.

The foundation is currently sheltering 14 suspected trafficking victims from a variety of countries including India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria.

The UAE has signed agreements with several labour-exporting countries, including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Philippines, during the last two years to regulate the flow of the labour workforce, the report pointed out.

A large number of the 1.5 million expatriate Indians in this Gulf nation are engaged as contract labour in the booming construction industry and as domestic help.

'Further, cooperation with the Philippines and India, for example, has resulted in these two countries announcing their refusal to grant emigration clearance to women below 25 and 30 years of age respectively who wish to work in the region in order to protect younger women from possible abuse.

'A wage standard has been introduced by some of these countries including Philippines, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka,' it said.

'The new report is aimed at sharing the UAE's efforts with our partners and promoting dialogue, transparency and knowledge exchange in order to learn from the experiences of other nations in combating this crime,' the WAM report quoted Gargash as saying.

The National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking, established in March 2007, will produce regular reports annually in order to document progress and challenges in fighting human trafficking.

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