

Doha meet urges laws to protect workers' rights

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A inter-regional conference on migrant workers concluded here yesterday with a call to governments in the Asian and Arab regions to formulate laws for domestic workers and protect the rights of migrant workers such as weekly day off, access to health and legal aid and social security covering work accidents.

The meeting also called for establishing a "legal maximum" on the number of working hours for woman workers and addressing the serious problem of human trafficking through comprehensive national policies and legislation.

The two-day meeting was organised jointly by the International Federation for Human Rights and the National Human Rights Committee of Qatar. The event, the first of its kind in the region, brought together about 50 participants including Qatari government officials and representatives of civil society and human rights groups, NGOs and trade unions from several Arab and Asian countries.

The final declaration issued after long deliberations, reaffirmed "the right to be free from arbitrary arrests and detention, the right not to be deported without prior review of their cases by an independent judiciary..., the right to be free from torture, slavery and slavery-like conditions and the right to freedom of belief and religion."

"The participants reviewed the abuses suffered by migrant workers in their countries of origin as well as in host countries, including the exploitation by the recruiting agencies, the fake contracts, double contracts, visa trafficking, shouldering travel expenses on migrants, employing them in jobs that are not in conformity with those stipulated in the contract including non-decent jobs," said the statement.

"These abuses lead many migrants to escape and sometimes commit suicide. Migrant workers are victims twice: once by their abusers and another by the system which penalises them by detention and deportation," it added.

The meeting urged all countries to come out with national plans and policies to protect the rights of all workers and recognise the International Day of Migrants on December 18 .

Other recommendations of the meeting include: FIDH and NHRC should establish a progress review, twice a year, on the legislation and on the social situation of foreign workers in the GCC. FIDH should facilitate the establishment of an inter-regional network between Arab and Asian organisations interested in the issues related to the situation of migrant workers through regular meetings and exchange of information.

NGOs should publish a booklet on migrants' rights translated in to languages of the origin countries and a directory of organisations in origin and host countries, for migrants to learn about their rights. Migrant workers should be involved in trade unions and should have access to counseling and advice bureaus.

Women NGOs should link with female migrant workers and offer assistance of a socio-legal nature. The participants called for campaigning and lobbying for the ratification and monitoring the implementation of international and regional human rights conventions and for conclusion of bilateral agreements between origin and host countries on the regulation of migration.