

Govt 'baffled' by US human trafficking rating

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Radha Basu

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Ministry surprised by move to downgrade S'pore

A UNITED States government report on how countries deal with human trafficking has downgraded Singapore a notch this year - a move the Government here has termed 'baffling'.

The US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (Tip) Report ranks 164 countries in three broad tiers based on their records in combating situations where poor, vulnerable people are forced or tricked into labour or sexual slavery overseas.

'The Singapore Government does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however it is making significant efforts to do so,' the report said, while pushing Singapore from Tier 1 to Tier 2.

The report was released in Washington by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Tuesday.

Tier 1 lists countries that have basic legal safeguards in place to prevent such crimes, Tier 2 lists countries that are making efforts to put laws in place to combat trafficking, while Tier 3 names the worst offenders.

With the exception of South Korea and Hong Kong, most Tier 1 countries are developed Western nations.

Expressing surprise at Singapore's Tier 2 listing, a Ministry of Home Affairs spokesman told The Straits Times that the trafficking situation here had 'remained stable over the past few years'.

'The US report has not satisfactorily explained how it arrived at its conclusion,' the spokesman added.

While the report did not elaborate on exactly what 'minimum standards' the Government did not comply with, The Straits Times understands they could pertain to laws that would criminalise all forms of trafficking.

Referring to current gaps in laws here, the report urged the Singapore Parliament to approve proposed amendments that would criminalise paid sex with anyone below 18, prosecute Singaporeans seeking child sex overseas and make promoting child-sex tours a criminal offence.

Moves to ensure exactly this are already afoot. In March last year, Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee had announced that Singapore would soon change its Penal Code to protect those below 18 from commercial sex.

The announcement may have prompted the US Department of State to swiftly upgrade Singapore from Tier 2 to Tier 1 in last year's report.

The fact that the changes are yet to be enacted could have prompted the US to knock Singapore back down into Tier 2, said civil society groups that combat trafficking.

President of women's rights group Unifem Singapore Saleemah Ismail pointed out that more than a year had lapsed since Associate Professor Ho's announcement, but the changes were yet to be enacted.

'Singapore is known for its efficiency so what's causing the delay?' she said.

'This is a First World country with First World infrastructure. It's about time we have First World laws for everyone as well.'

While acknowledging that such law changes took time to craft, women's rights advocate Braema Mathi too noted that speedy enactment and implementation were especially important when it came to protecting children.

Ms Mathi heads the trafficking of children committee at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

Referring to proposed laws to crack down on Singaporean child-sex predators who preyed overseas, she said:

'The faster we can get protection and punitive measures, the better it will be for these innocent child victims.'

The MHA says the proposed Penal Code amendments will happen later this year.

The spokesman added: 'We view the problem of human trafficking seriously and we have taken action to deal firmly with trafficking in persons. Singapore is mindful of the fact that, as an open society, it is not insulated from developments in the region and the world, whether these are problems of forced prostitution, sexual abuse of minors, drug trafficking or terrorism.'

radhab@sph.com.sg