

Curbing human trafficking: S'pore falls short, says US

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Arlina Arshad

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Despite Penal Code changes, Republic has not fully met international norms
SINGAPORE still falls short of international standards to fight human trafficking, despite recently amending the Penal Code so those who sexually exploit minors overseas - as well as child-sex tour organisers and promoters - can be jailed.

Based on the US State Department's annual Trafficking In Persons Report released recently, Singapore is among 70 nations placed in 'Tier 2', alongside countries like Cambodia and Thailand.

Those in this tier do not fully comply with minimum international standards of protecting migrant workers from conditions of forced labour or other forms of trafficking in persons, even if they are making 'significant efforts' to do so.

This year, the report acknowledged Singapore's 'significant efforts' to criminalise trafficking, notably the Penal Code changes in February.

But the country fell short because it did not prosecute or convict any trafficking offenders during this period.

The report also noted that Singapore lacks measures to protect trafficking victims, including maids subjected to forced labour conditions.

Of the 28 human-trafficking reports investigated by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), 27 were dropped due to lack of substantiating evidence, the report noted. One is still under investigation.

The ministry disputed these cases cited by the report, saying they were 'disputes of various natures' but not trafficking offences. It could not provide further details.

The report also said 130 people were arrested for pimping and abetting vice offences, and 15 pimps and 30 vice-abetters were prosecuted for living on the earnings of prostitutes or operating brothels, or both.

But the ministry spokesman said the instances of women being duped into vice were 'few and far between'.

'None of the prostitutes were found to be forced or lured into prostitution under false pretences, constituting trafficking in persons' offences,' she said.

'The misperception that lack of prosecution arising from the reported cases was due to ineffective enforcement must be corrected.'

The US State Department's report evaluates countries' efforts in fighting the trafficking of people forced into servitude or the sex trade every year.

It includes countries deemed to have a 'significant' number of victims, or at least 100, and they are put into four levels - Tiers 1 and 2, a Tier 2 Special Watchlist, and the blacklisted ones in Tier 3.

A total of 154 countries were rated this year, based on research conducted between April last year and this March.

Singapore has been in Tier 2 since the report's 2001 launch, except in 2003, when it was excluded, and 2006, when it made it to Tier 1.

Activists say the problem lies with Singapore's narrow definition of 'trafficking'. Women who may have been brought here under false pretences and then forced to work as prostitutes or abused labourers, for example, often end up classified as immigration offenders, not victims.

'It means that the traffickers get away with the crime and the victims of trafficking risk being prosecuted,' said Ms Constance Singam, president of the Association of Women for Action and Research.

And as far as maids are concerned, United Nations Development Fund for Women Singapore president Saleemah Ismail said maids are also reluctant to seek legal recourse as complainants have to remain in Singapore, without any source of income, for the entire duration of the case.

'These migrant domestic workers are often the only breadwinners back home...For many, it is a cost they cannot afford,' she said.