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## Singapore Advocacy Groups Campaign 'Days Off' for Maids

By GILLIAN WONG / AP WRITER / SINGAPORE

Friday, May 2, 2008

Foreign domestic workers in Singapore, most of whom live with their employers, deserve a regular rest day just like anyone else in the city-state, said organizers of a new campaign starting on Thursday.

The "Day Off" campaign sets out to raise awareness of the need for Singaporean employers to consider a weekly or monthly rest day a basic right of their domestic workers, said Saleemah Ismail, president of UNIFEM Singapore.



Susan, a 36-year-old maid from the Philippines, works at her employer's house in Singapore April 29, 2008. About half of Singapore's 170,000 foreign maids do not have a rest day according to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Maid agencies in the city state fear an exodus, as offers of twice the pay and a compulsory day off lure its maids overseas, according to the Straits Times newspaper. (Photo: Reuters)

"This campaign is to educate Singaporean employers of the need to give foreign domestic workers a day off—which is the same benefit that they themselves are getting from their workplaces," Saleemah told *The Associated Press* on Wednesday.

The campaign will start with the unveiling of a new Web site carrying information on how to improve the working relationships between employers and their foreign domestic workers. Thursday is also May

Day, a public holiday in Singapore.

One in six families hires a maid in Singapore, a wealthy Southeast Asian city-state of 4.5 million people, and about 170,000 migrant women, mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia, are employed here as domestic workers.

Rest days for maids are not mandatory in Singapore, and the government has in recent years come under pressure by employment watchdogs and rights groups like Human Rights Watch to legislate such days off.

Activists have argued that foreign domestic workers should be included in the city-state's Employment Act, which states how many days rest an employee is entitled to each week. But the Manpower Ministry in 2006 rejected such calls, arguing it would inconvenience families with special needs.

Instead, the government wanted consumer watchdog bodies and maid employment agencies to implement standard employment contracts that stipulate monthly or weekly rest days.

But many maids are still not getting any time off, according to Indonesian Embassy official Kemal Haripurwanto.

He told the AP that the embassy receives about 30 phone calls a day from Indonesian maids seeking help because they have not been given rest days. This is as frequent as before the official call to include days off in employment contracts two years ago, he said.

"There should be a socialization on what a day off means to domestic workers," Kemal said. "There should be equal protection for a foreign domestic worker's well-being."

The Manpower Ministry said in a statement that it is committed to ensuring the interests and welfare of maids are safeguarded.

It said the new campaign was "in line" with the ministry's efforts to ensure that maids are accorded adequate rest.

Co-organized by the Humanitarian Organization of Migrant Economics and the Transient Workers Count Too, the campaign is scheduled to run till the end of the year.

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