

Migrant rights push is hit by 'instability'

By RAJI UNNIKRISHNAN

REGIONAL tensions have impacted the ability of rights activists to protect migrant workers across the Middle East, according to an expert.

Instability in several countries has resulted in the issue being forced onto the back burner, said Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) regional co-ordinator William Gois.

He explained that security and political concerns had taken over the agenda in a number of countries, which resulted in the rights of foreign manpower falling down the list of priorities.

"We (MFA) create and sustain networks, we give training and thus provide exposure and spread knowledge – creating a ripple effect," he said.

"However, in the last few years it has shrunk because of political tensions in the region.

"This work helping empowering people with the courage to say what's right and wrong, and express openly about their rights, is sometimes seen as a threat to the stability of some countries.

"I think there's a lot more focus from governments to protect their image, as in what is projected to the world and what



■ Mr Gois, back centre, with participants at the migrant rights event



■ Regional instability has impacted migrant rights, according to an expert

information is going out about the situation.

"Nobody wants to be seen as a country that has a prevalence of forced labour or slave-like conditions.

"This is an age where countries are talking about foreign investment and tourism – and you don't want to be seen as a dark place."

Mr Gois was among those

who took part at an event in Qatar last month focusing on the welfare of migrant workers in the Middle East.

He told the *GDN* that despite growing regional awareness of

the need to protect vulnerable foreign workers from abuse and exploitation, the rights of some were still being denied.

"There's recognition that there are rights and there is recognition that these rights are blatantly denied," he said.

"So there is a call we need to make, which is to do much more.

"And that call has become more widespread.

"Compared with my earlier days of association with the MFA 15 years ago, I see lot more people and countries taking interest in protecting migrant rights with commitment.

"It is there, though not as fast as I would like to see it happen.

"When we are wanting to run, we are compelled to walk slowly – and that's how it is like in the region, in my observation."

Bahrain is among countries in the region that have taken steps to improve conditions of their expatriate workforce, allowing free movement between employers, participation in

trade unions and banning outdoor work between midday and 4pm during the hottest months of July and August.

Meanwhile, last month a new self-sponsorship system was launched that allowed expatriates to work legally in any company or establishment, as part of efforts to tackle the illegal labour market.

Appreciation

"Over the years I see larger deployment of measures on protection of migrants' rights and there's a greater appreciation in this region," said Mr Gois.

"And even some countries of origin are doing better to support migrant workers.

"Work is being done and we also have government programmes in place to support migrant workers, like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue.

"There are efforts to bring new regulations, expose oversight, transparency and responsibility in protection of migrants' rights."

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Tribute to 'people's ambassador'

MORE than 100 people attended a condolence meeting organised by the Indian Community Relief Fund (ICRF), in association with Bahrain Keraleeya Samajam (BKS), to mourn the death of Dr George Joseph, a former Indian ambassador to India.

Also present were Indian Ambassador Alok Kumar Sinha, ICRF chairman Bhagawan Asarpota, BKS president Radhakrishna Pillai, community leaders and representatives of various social organisations.

Dr Joseph, who served in Bahrain from January 2009 to October 2010, died on Thursday following an

illness.

He was popularly known as "the people's ambassador" for his close relations with members of the Indian community.

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■ A section of the crowd at the condolence meeting



■ Mr Sinha speaks on the occasion, in the presence of Mr Asarpota and Mr Pillai