

# Proposed scheme to replace sponsorship system under study

Cabinet evaluating 'civilised' procedure; decision expected soon

- By Abdullah Rasheed, Abu Dhabi Editor and Abbas Al Lawati, Staff Reporter
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Dubai: A plan to replace the current sponsorship scheme or kafala system is under study by the cabinet , a cabinet source told Gulf News.

The Ministry of Labour has made a proposal to the cabinet laying out the framework for a new employment system for expatriates, a cabinet source told Gulf News on condition of anonymity.

## No decision

The plan is currently under discussion and no decision has been made yet on approving it, said the source, refusing to divulge details of the proposed system.

The statement follows remarks made by the president of the Emirates Human Rights Authority, Abdul Gaffar Hussain, on Wednesday that the Ministry of Labour is expected to approve "a new system to replace the sponsorship system" by year's end.

"I have spoken to the Minister of Labour and he presented to me an alternative system which is very good," said Hussain, describing it as "much more civilised" than the current "backward system".

Hussain was speaking at a press conference over a recently published report by Human Rights Watch on the human rights situation in the UAE.

The Minister of Labour, Saqr Gobash Saeed Gobash, did not respond to Gulf News' request for a comment on the issue.

The sponsorship system mandates that expatriates be sponsored by a national employer to obtain work and residency permit, giving sponsors the possibility to control a foreign worker's entry into and departure from the country as well as his or her legal and professional status. The system, adopted in some form in all Gulf states dependent on expatriate work force, has been heavily criticised in the region and outside for granting employers restrictive power over their workers.

## Consultation

Dr Ahmad Saif Bel Hasa, chairman of the UAE Contractors Association, said any such decision would likely be taken in consultation with the private sector, and that his association has so far not been approached by the labour ministry to give its inputs on the issue.

"It's too early to say whether a change would be positive or negative for us. We need to know the details of any such change first," he said.

*With inputs from Bassma Al Jandaly/Senior Reporter*

### **Strong opposition**

When Bahrain's labour minister said that the country was dropping the controversial sponsorship system last year, few people thought that his plan would go through. Strong opposition from the business community and the steady demand for jobs in the Gulf meant the "grapes of wrath" situation where employers dictate and employees consent would remain intact in the Gulf. Now, six months after the start of the application, there is a realisation that altering the system that has for decades ruled employment relations in the Gulf can be made without the chaos they long dreaded.

*Habib Toumi, Bahrain Bureau Chief*

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