

Maids find local champion

Mom Kunthear and Justine Drennan

THE abuse of Cambodian maids overseas has become one of the more well-documented human rights violations here. But as the government, media, NGOs and aid agencies focus their energies on domestic labourers living abroad, advocates have begun to urge that closer attention be paid to maids working in the Kingdom.

That's the aim of the newly formed Cambodian Domestic Worker Net-

work, whose more than 100 members on Sunday established the nation's first group to focus on the interests of maids in Cambodia.

"I decided to form the network because domestic workers in Cambodia did not have any institution or union to protect them from rights abuses and negotiate benefits for them," said Vorn Pao, president of the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA).

Most domestic workers in Cambodia work behind closed doors, making

it difficult for others to learn about the hardships they face, said Pao, adding that these difficulties include low wages, scant benefits and abusive treatment from employers.

Although these are many of the same issues faced by Cambodian domestic workers abroad, the government and other institutions have not given maids in Cambodia anywhere near the attention paid to migrant workers, Pao said.

In fact, the plight of workers abroad was the subject an open parliamen-

tary forum yesterday, in which National Assembly President Heng Samrin and other officials stressed the need to expedite international and bilateral co-operation on the matter, paying particular attention to maids.

"Cambodia should increase its efforts to implement international and regional conventions to protect our migrant workers," Samrin told attendees at the forum, which included government officials, NGOs and international partners.

Despite these public efforts to

strengthen the protections of maids abroad, Pao and other observers pointed out that the Cambodian government has not approved International Labour Convention No 198, which would protect the rights of maids working within the ratifying country.

"We don't understand why they did not ratify," said Moeun Tola, head of the labour program at the Community Legal Education Centre. "The Cambodian government always showed a

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positive position toward the convention, but during the voting day, they just disappeared.”

While the June 2010 vote on the convention in Geneva saw the representatives from Singapore and Malaysia in the room decline to ratify it, the Cambodian representatives were nowhere to be found, Tola said.

If Cambodia were to ratify the convention, it would have greater leverage in negotiating worker protection memoranda of understanding with countries like Malaysia, where significant abuse of maids has occurred, Tola said. But, he added, links between recruitment agencies and high-ranking government officials would likely undermine support for this move.

In October, Ung Seang Rithy, sister of deputy national police chief Sok Phal, was appointed head of the Association of Cambodian Recruitment Agencies amid concerns from observers like Tola.

Khun Tharo, program officer for the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, said that the issue of maids’



An underage maid is seen through the bars of a gate at a training centre for domestic migrant workers in Phnom Penh last year. The girl, along with dozens of other maids, were rescued the following day. PHA LINA

rights within Cambodia may have escaped the government’s attention because there are fewer maids employed in Cambodia than there are abroad, and their complaints have been less vocal.

Tharo hoped that the advent of the Cambodian Domestic Worker Network would encourage the government to ratify Convention 189 and ensure that maids in Cambodia have such necessities as adequate wages, overtime benefits and annual leave.

Unlike factory workers, maids in Cambodia previously had no institutions through which to

negotiate such matters, said Vun Samphors, president of the new Domestic Worker Network, which is now seeking to expand its membership.

“On average, domestic workers in Cambodia get \$50 per month,” Samphors said. “We ask that they receive \$100 and overtime benefits, because they work on weekends and have to work double if their employers have events in their homes.”

A 22-year-old member of the Domestic Worker Network who asked to be identified only as Sophorn said she left her home in Pursat province two years ago

to work as a domestic worker in Phnom Penh but now receives only \$60 per month with no benefits for her work in a residence and guesthouse.

“I have to work from 5am until 8pm every day without taking any breaks,” Sophorn said.

Officials from the Ministries of Labour and Women’s Affairs declined to comment on the matter, with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs stating that they could respond only to written requests. Chou Bun Eng, secretary of state at the Ministry of Interior, could not be reached.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY SEN DAVID