

# Strike threat by agencies rapped

By RAJI UNNIKRISHNAN

A STRIKE threatened by Bahrain's housemaid recruitment agencies in response to proposed stricter regulation of the market has been branded "despicable" by a top labour official.

Bahrain Recruiters Society (BRS), which represents the majority of licensed recruitment or "manpower" agencies in the country, has called for a general strike during Ramadan.

The move would see them halt the hiring of domestic workers for the whole of the holy month and was called for in protest against new rules issued by the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), effective since June 1, which require agencies to have at least BD10,000 deposited in a bank account in order to have their licence renewed.

LMRA chief executive Ausamah Al Absi told the GDN that he understood the agencies' concerns, but thought BD10,000 was a small price to pay when they "deal with the lives of underprivileged domestic workers and charge Bahraini households in excess of BD1,000" each.

"Of course it is understandable that they would resist efforts to bring some order and balance to their stranglehold on the market," he said.

"However, threatening to take the market hostage in exchange for their monopoly is despicable and clear evidence that this monopoly must come under the watchful eye of the law."

Meanwhile, BRS representatives said that they were looking into all possible options prior to declaring a strike.

After failing to reach an agreement with Mr Al Absi during a meeting two weeks ago, BRS officials are now awaiting a reply from the office of His Royal Highness Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa after requesting a meeting to discuss their concerns.

"We have written about our objection to this

## Activist welcomes new regulation

A RIGHTS activist has welcomed efforts to hold so-called "manpower" agencies to account, but said more must be done to protect domestic workers.

Migrant Workers Protection Society chairwoman Marietta Dias backed new regulations from the Labour Market Regulatory Authority that require housemaid recruitment agencies to maintain a bank account with at least BD10,000 in it in order to keep their licences.

"We are in total agreement with the deposit regulation as this would help in case of emergencies," said Ms Dias.

"But what is more important is a body that would continually monitor these manpower agencies.

"Every agency must be

monitored and regulated as we face too many problems with sponsors and agencies.

"In case things go wrong there should be a responsible body to whom we can revert, which should be able to address our concerns."

Ms Dias added that hiring agents should be held accountable as they were involved in a "big money" business that affected people's lives.

"They cannot wash their hands of the issues so easily," she said, pointing to the oft-cited three-month agreement between agencies and sponsors that sees the former eschew all responsibility for domestic workers

once they have been in Bahrain for the first quarter of their first year.



■ Ms Dias

Bahrain Recruiters Society member and owner of Al Hubail Manpower Agency Abbas Abdulrabab Al Basri

claimed that the domestic worker recruitment business in Bahrain had been badly hit by restrictions imposed by authorities.

"Approval for maids by immigration takes more than a month and by that time, the sponsors get upset," he said.

### Burden

"While we wait we have to support the maids – accommodation and food, which is an added expense for us.

"Most of the time immigration rejects the maids – mainly those from Ethiopia, who are the majority of those hired.

"These days Indonesian and Filipino maids are difficult to be hired as they are demanding higher salaries."

Mr Al Basri said that recruitment agencies would only take a nine to 15 per cent cut on the BD850 to BD1,000 business deals made with households for the hiring of a maid.

"We used to hire 30 to 40 maids a month, now it's hardly five," he said.

"The sending countries' preference has also changed to Saudi Arabia of late.

"How does the government expect us to pay BD10,000 in such bad business conditions?"

to the Labour Ministry and they had referred the matter to the LMRA," said BRS chairman Fareed Al Mahmeed, who claimed that recruitment agencies were not against holding a BD10,000 deposit, but did not want to be held "solely responsible" for issues arising from the hiring of domestic workers.

"It looks like we are responsible for all the runaway housemaids and other similar cases," he said.

"It is unfair, as we are just mediators between the sponsors in Bahrain and the agents in the sending country."

Mr Al Mahmeed told the GDN that recruiters hire workers based solely upon their job applications, never actually meeting them face-to-face.

"In some cases, the résumé of the worker looks perfect, but the individual may not be suitable or as desired by the employer," he said.

"Either way, we are ready to help sponsors, even if it is after the agreed three-month period of our contract."



■ Mr Al Absi



■ Mr Al Mahmeed

## COUNCIL LOSES PLEA AGAINST CLOSURE

By NOOR ZAHRA

AN unlicensed religious council that was dissolved for getting involved in politics has had an appeal against its closure rejected.

The Ulama Islamic Council, made up of senior Jaffari (Shi'ite) clergymen, was dissolved by the High Administrative Court on January 29.

A judge also ordered the liquidation of the council's assets.

The council was the main decision-making body for the Jaffari faith in Bahrain and its religious rulings were respected by the broader Shia community, but it was never legally registered.

It was taken to court by the Justice, Islamic Af-

fairs and Endowments Ministry for inciting sectarianism, dabbling in politics and encouraging violence.

The High Administrative Court ruled in favour of the ministry, saying the council functioned like a political movement and used religion as cover.

The High Administrative Appeals Court reviewed the case this week and yesterday upheld the initial verdict yesterday.

Lawyers told the GDN that they intend to lodge a final appeal at the Cassation Court.

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