

Nepal must punish recruiters who exploit migrant workers — U.N.

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KATHMANDU (Feb 5)(Thomson Reuters Foundation): Nepal must punish recruitment agencies that charge migrant workers illegally high fees to find jobs abroad, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, the United Nations said on Monday.

Remittances sent home by about 4 million Nepalis, mainly working in construction or as domestic servants in the Middle East, Malaysia and South Korea, make up nearly 30% of the Himalayan nation's gross domestic product, state officials say. Rights groups such as Amnesty International say poor migrants become trapped in a cycle of debt and exploitation, as they have to borrow large sums of money at high interest rates to pay recruitment agencies who arrange jobs for them overseas.

Once abroad, migrant workers often have their passports confiscated and find themselves trapped in forced labour — having to work for years to clear their debts — activists say. The Nepali government allows private recruitment agencies to charge migrant workers a fee of US\$100 to process their papers, but a top U.N. official said the costs can be as high as US\$1,750.

The government should "revoke the licences of recruitment agencies that charge fees to migrants ... or have abused their human or labour rights," said Felipe Gonzalez Morales, U.N. special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. "Licences should be subject to regular renewal with compliance with human rights obligations," he told a press conference in Kathmandu after a week-long visit to Nepal to meet state officials, rights groups, migrants and their families. Nepal should sign legally binding bilateral agreements with destination countries to protect its overseas workers, who often do not receive or cannot understand their contracts, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, Morales added.

Yet Nepali authorities say recruitment agencies are being monitored, and that those charging illegal fees are punished. Foreign Employment Department Director Mohan Adhikari said such penalties ranged from fines of US\$1,000 to revoking licences.

"We are making all efforts to protect migrant workers and to ensure that they are not exploited," Adhikari told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

Nepal is working with India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to better protect the rights of overseas migrant workers, he added.

Wedged between China and India, Nepal is one of the poorest nations in South Asia and is recovering from a 2015 earthquake that killed 9,000 people and destroyed about one million homes.

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