

# Human trafficking hurting the

By Jacky Achan

**W**hen it comes to labour export, the sector has been shrouded with controversy over exploitation and mistreatment of labourers, both from their recruiters and employers.

At the height of these complaints, the Government in 2016 banned sending Ugandan girls to work as housemaids to Saudi Arabia. This despite having an agreement in place with the wealthy Gulf nation to ship domestic workers there.

The Government demanded that Saudi Arabia put in place a conducive work environment. Eventually, the ban was lifted last year.

But the distress is well-documented. Migrant rights, in their online publication, cited the suffering of one Irene Nabbanja, who, upon leaving her workplace and demanding to return home because of unfavourable working conditions, was locked up in a room by her recruitment agent.

In trying to escape, she fell from the fourth floor and severely injured her spinal cord. Disabled, her agent threatened to abandon her if her family did not raise money for an air ticket to return her home.

Eventually, her family managed to get her the air ticket that enabled



Some of the girls rescued by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Affairs from the city of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia with permanent secretary, Pius Bigirimana. The girls said they were tortured and sexually harassed by their employers

her return home.

But that's not all. A parliamentary report documenting the deaths of Ugandans in the Middle East found that 48 workers had died in the first

eight months last year, 35 of whom had allegedly committed suicide.

Ngora County MP David Abala, who headed the committee, said he was shocked by the findings

of their field visit.

He said rape, torture, unpaid wages and confinement were some of the chief reasons behind the suicide cases.

"Ugandan maids are treated like slaves and are not allowed to eat the same food as their employers or even use the same plates," he said. Migrant workers make up over half

# he external labour market

of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) population, but have limited labour rights, leaving them vulnerable to mistreatment.

## Where is the problem?

According to Andrew Kameraho, the chairperson of the Uganda Association of External Recruitment Agency (UAERA), a company composed of companies licensed to externalise labour, the challenge lies in human trafficking.

He says unlicensed companies traffic Ugandans and hand them over to wrong elements.

"For them, it is all about making quick profits. Yet we, the licensed labour exporting organisations, are looking at sustainability of our businesses. Human trafficking remains a big international challenge," Kameraho says.



Kameraho says given the current unemployment challenges in the country, labour export is unavoidable

## Why export labour

The Middle East's economy is expected to grow 2.9% this year, up from 1.1% in 2017.

The region has abundant natural resources and accounts for a large share of world petroleum production and exports

and is seeing rising prices.

Also, it has abundant human resource but, Kameraho says half of this human resource is imported.

"Where we aspire to export, labour countries in the Middle East aspire to import labourers because they do not have the required numbers for their huge economy that is growing fast," he says.

Giving the example of Dubai that was built by migrant workers, he says: "There are Americans working in Dubai. People do not come from poor countries alone. Job placement is a lucrative worldwide business that generates \$60b annually and we must tap into it," he says.

Therefore, even though there are challenges, migrating for work provides immense opportunities for gainful employment for Ugandans faced with the challenge of lack of jobs, says Kameraho.

The law to externalize labour was enacted in 2005 and it established a labour externalisation unit within the labour ministry.

The unit tries to ensure that Ugandans leave for work overseas, under licensed countries.

Today, there are 120,000

**FORTY-EIGHT UGANDAN WORKERS COMMITTED SUICIDE LAST YEAR IN CASES RELATED TO MISTREATMENT, EXPLOITATION ON JOB IN UAE**

Ugandans working in the Middle East alone and they remit over \$500m annually of Uganda's global annual remittance, which is at \$1.37b.

## What is being done

Kameraho explains that before 2005, the sector was not streamlined.

"There were loopholes and no contract for workers or fall back in case the job did not work," he says.

"People are still going on their own but, official channels are there that guarantee the job seekers employment overseas," Kameraho says.

Today, there are agreements between the Government and

the labour importing country, the agency sending the worker and the agency receiving, plus the employer and employee.

"All these agreements are for the protection of the worker. If there is a breach, the law must take its course and there are courts in place," Kamerho says.

He says the licensed labour exporting organisations also have a monitoring mechanism through the Saudi embassy in Uganda and the Uganda embassy in Saudi Arabia. The labour attaché monitors the welfare of Ugandans in this country.

Also in place is an online system that takes in the detail of each labourer exported.

"When you express interest in the job, you are vetted starting from the LC1 level to district level, then you take your documents to the ministry for verification. Once everything is in order, the information is fed online (including the country you are going and company in charge), then you are given a code," he says.

This information is shared with the Saudi embassy in Uganda and other key stakeholders. So in case one has a complaint of exploitation, the people in charge can refer to this data and follow up.

"Protection of workers is paramount. We ensure they have employment contracts, get paid and their welfare is taken care of," Kameraho says.

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# Labour body moves to end exploitation

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UAERA is engaging recruitment agencies in labour importing countries such as Jordan. They have signed an agreement to ensure Ugandan workers are protected from exploitation and mistreatment.

Also in the agreement are terms and conditions of service to be adhered to that include medical coverage, insurance and provision of accommodation.

"Ours is to get all licensed labour exporting companies to work under one umbrella, so that we can advocate for our interests, self-regulate according to the law and benefit from our business," he adds.

## Other measures

Kameraho says UAERA has proper communication channels through linkages with countries that employ Ugandans.

"We agree on how to handle our people with our counterparts in the employing countries. I have also established contacts with chairpersons of labour externalisation agencies in Kenya and Ghana. Together, we have strong bargaining power for our workers," he says.

"For the Ugandans, after two to three years of good work, we lobby to have them promoted to supervisory positions so they feel appreciated," he adds.

Kameraho says every worker has the opportunity to have their



Ugandans seeking employment abroad are encouraged to go through the proper channels to avoid being trafficked. They are also helped by the Ugandan embassy should anything go wrong

**UAERA HAS SIGNED A DEAL WITH RECRUITMENT AGENCIES IN LABOUR IMPORTING COUNTRIES TO ENSURE UGANDAN WORKERS ARE PROTECTED FROM EXPLOITATION**

contract renewed after the initial two years for as long as they have a good work ethic.

He also says work conditions have improved.

To improve labour exports and earnings, Kameraho says Uganda now needs to move into more professional areas.

"Most of our labour exports

are semi-skilled, only a few are professionals," he says.

Kameraho explains exporting more professionals to work overseas will amount to getting better and more jobs and Ugandans can earn more money and fight poverty.

He says the Philippines get \$30m a year from remittances, yet Uganda is just at \$1.3m. While Ghana, a country of about 28 million people, gets \$3b, which calls for Uganda to improve.

Kameraho says the Government needs to consider creating a fund from which Ugandans can draw money to get jobs overseas.

"As they send money back home, a next of kin can be put in charge of paying back this money to the Government," he says.

He adds that UAERA brings agencies to interview people for available jobs and out of 100 people, usually about 50 of them are suitable candidates, yet only 25 of them can pay a placement fee to the agency.

This is in addition to air tickets, yellow fever vaccination, visa, passport, medical tests and Interpol verification.

He says only countries that employ directly like Saudi Arabia do not ask workers to pay for air tickets. So where this is demanded, many lose out on jobs.

Of the Ugandans who go to work in the Middle East, 80% are male whereas the remaining 20% are female.