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MP Christopher de Souza, who plans to introduce a private member's Bill in Parliament on the Prevention of Human Trafficking, said he and a taskforce looking into this issue are happy to work alongside civil society and members of the public.



SINGAPORE: The authorities cannot go it alone in the fight against human trafficking.

MP Christopher de Souza, who plans to introduce a private member's Bill in Parliament on the Prevention of Human Trafficking, said he and a taskforce looking into this issue are happy to work alongside civil society and members of the public.

Singapore is one of many countries that have become a convenient point of transit and a destination for human trafficking.

Tata, an Indonesian, was a victim of human trafficking.

When she lost her job back home, a friend told her she could work at a restaurant in Singapore

With a child to support, she agreed.

Instead, Tata was forced to become a sex worker in Geylang last year.

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"What I did in Singapore was not what I wanted to do. It was forced on me by other people," she said, adding that she was left traumatised by what happened.

She recalled how she was locked up and could not go out freely. Other working girls also acted as look-outs.

Tata first came to Singapore on 20 March 2013, and managed to leave for Batam about a month later.

She shared her story at a Human Trafficking seminar, organised by the Singapore Management University's Wee Kim Wee Centre, on Friday.

The seminar is aimed at raising public awareness of human trafficking issues.

It's the second of two seminars which are sponsored by the Singapore Inter-Agency Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons.

The first seminar was held at the National University of Singapore in January.

Jonathan Martens, senior migrant assistance specialist at International Organisation for Migration, said: "Trafficking is not something far away. It's not something out there. Every single one of us, in some way, benefits from a trafficking situation, or a forced labour situation or a labour exploitation situation, in what we buy and what we sell."

Human trafficking is no longer confined to sexual exploitation, which typically involves women and children.

Mr Martens said that since 2008, there has been an emerging awareness of trafficking for other forms of exploitation - such as forced labour in construction sites or agricultural plots.

He said: "All of these areas are where we've seen a lot more male victims. And so one of the major trends we've seen is a much greater proportion of male victims among those being identified.

"This is not to say they weren't there before. It's just that the nature of our response has changed, and as a result we are finding more of them."

Another area of growing concern is what has been described as virtual trafficking.

Bindu Sharma, Asia Pacific policy director of International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (Singapore office), said: "It's a profit-making e-commerce that people use because they realise they can make money by selling outright child sexual abuse images.

"You may remove a URL or commercial website that is trading in these images, but if it's in someone's personal collection or in someone's personal computer, a thumbdrive - this child that was victimised once is victimised over and over again."

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She added that industry players - like internet providers - can step in to mitigate the problem.

She said: "Industry players, whether it's commercial, financial industry, or the internet providers - they aren't complicit in this kind of abuse. But their platforms are being abused.

"So in some way or form, they need to take ownership of the issue, and they have the technology and capability... to try to address this - whether it's a notification of take down, blocking, doing data mining and data trends around what they see on the platforms and making an effort to remove it."

Late last year, MP Christopher de Souza announced his intention to introduce a private member's Bill on the Prevention of Human Trafficking.

Mr de Souza expects to table the Bill in November.

For now, he and members of the Singapore Inter-Agency Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons are focusing on gathering feedback.

The Bill would criminalise human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labour and organ harvesting.

Four consultation sessions to seek feedback have already been conducted, with two more scheduled to take place this month.

"It has been a very enriching and enlightening past few months," said Mr de Souza, adding that discussions in the past four consultations have focused on how the Bill can be tightened to deal with traffickers and to assist the victims.

Right now, offences related to human trafficking are covered under existing laws including the Women's Charter and the Children and Young Persons Act.

The proposed Prevention of Human Trafficking Bill would be a dedicated piece of legislation that would serve as a deterrent for such offences.

It is expected to offer greater protection to victims and is gender neutral.

- CNA/ir