

End of the road for artiste visas

By Jean Christou

(archive article - Saturday, September 13, 2008)

ARTISTE visas, which encouraged sex trafficking to the island, will be abolished by the end of October, Interior Minister Neoclis Sylikiotis said yesterday.

The move was one of a number of major changes to immigration procedures that Sylikiotis announced yesterday.

Others included expanding the areas in which asylum seekers can work. Currently they are only allowed to work in the agricultural sector, leaving those who cannot do so as a burden on state finances.

The thorny issue of long-term residency for third-country workers was also being sorted out in accordance with EU rules, Sylikiotis said after a ministerial meeting with Labour Minister Sotiroulla Charalambous and Justice Minister Kypros Chrysostomides.

The abolition of artiste visas is of huge significance for Cyprus and its notorious cabaret industry as they have given Cyprus a bad name in terms of its commitment to stamp out human trafficking.

Many women who work in cabarets are literally prisoners and are badly mistreated by their employers under the current system.

But under the new rules, they would have to apply for the same kind of work permit as any other third-country national.

"It is paradoxical that in Cyprus that we have separate employment authorisation for the so-called 'artistic license', which leads to the stigmatisation of Cyprus abroad," said the Minister.

He said a committee has been appointed to work out the details.

Interior Ministry Permanent Secretary Lazaros Savvides, expanding on the Minister's comments, told the Cyprus Mail that those women currently in Cyprus on six-month artiste visas would be allowed to finish their contracts.

In future, however, those coming to work in cabarets will have to register for normal work permits and register with the Labour Ministry.

"We will draft a code of procedures," said Savvides.

He said this would include details of the exact conditions of employment and also a new contract.

The new contracts will be designed to prevent unscrupulous cabaret owners and agents who make a living securing artiste licences from being able to hold the women as prisoners.

"They will be completely different and everything will be in line with the new European way of thinking," Savvides added. "We are trying to stop anyone making prisoners of these people."

Asked if the Ministry had any feedback from the cabaret industry, Savvides said: "They should have known this was coming. It's a one-way street," he said. "It's a bad omen for them."

Only two months ago the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) said trafficking in women for sexual exploitation in Cyprus had taken on dangerous dimensions and that it was being tolerated by the government by its delay in withdrawing the artiste visa.

MIGS warned that any efforts on behalf of the government to combat trafficking would fail if the category of 'artiste' visa is not abolished entirely.

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