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670 complaints lodged by amahs

By HELEN SIGNY

A DOMESTIC helpers union received almost 670 complaints against employers last year, including allegations of sexual and physical assault and being forced to work more than 15 hours a day.

Mr Cesar Santoyo of the Asian Domestic Helpers Union said: "This is only a small fraction because there are people who do not come to our office for help - we believe there are a lot more."

Other complaints included being forced to work illegally, lack of food, underpayment, and illegal recruitment.

Several employers were known to have committed the same offences against more than one domestic worker, while the union also had a black list of illegal recruitment agencies, he said.

A worker dealing with Filipinos' labour problems said the "two-week rule" was the biggest worry of amahs because many were afraid to complain about poor conditions in case their contract was terminated.

Most domestic workers are forced to leave Hongkong within two weeks of the termination of their contract, or pay \$115 for an extended week-long tourist visa.

"Some terminations are doubly difficult because the employer who initiates the termination refuses to indicate the reason," he said.

"No Hongkong forum would want to act on such a controversy, and the maid is forced to return to the Philippines."

The rule could also affect the domestic worker's family, as she was usually the main financial support and it could take several months before she could find new employment.

The Philippine Consul-General, Mr Antonio Villamor, said the Labour and Immigration departments were usually lenient in granting extended stays to domestic workers who had problems with their employers.

An Immigration Department spokesman said the employer or employee could terminate the contract at

any time, and on termination the domestic worker was granted a two-week stay in which to find a new employer. She then had to return to her own country to obtain a new work permit.

The Hongkong Council of Women is to hold a seminar on the employment of overseas domestic helpers in Hongkong on Saturday, which will be attended by welfare workers, solicitors, labour experts, the Government and representatives from the Philippine Consulate.

In a related development, champion horse trainer Brian Kan Ping-chee's former maid is to receive the balance of \$70,000 damages awarded to her after he was convicted of five counts of indecently assaulting her.

Legal Aid assistant director Mr Tony North said the woman had already received \$25,000 of the award to tide her over until the full amount could be paid.

But the millionaire horse trainer had now paid the full amount and it would be passed on to his former maid within six weeks.

"We were not delighted with the award - we thought we would get more," Mr North said, adding however that it was rare for damages to be granted in such a case of indecent assault.

Costs for the case will be quantified by the taxing master in the High Court on October 18, he said.

Kan was convicted of five counts of indecent assault against his maid in March last year, for which he was fined \$25,000 and later ordered to give the woman one month's salary of \$2,400 in lieu of notice, \$200 costs and a one-way air ticket to Manila.

The woman then applied for compensation through the Legal Aid Department, but was unable to work until her case was tried earlier this year.

Compensation of \$70,000 was agreed upon, of which the department gave her \$25,000 and withheld the balance until it had received the money from Kan.

"Mr Kan has already paid the award and we understand there won't be any problems," Mr North said.