

Officials should meet researchers, Hussain says

Blames human rights groups and government officials for negative and unbalanced coverage of the country

- By Abbas Al Lawati, Staff Reporter
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Dubai: Human rights groups and government officials are both to blame for negative and "unbalanced" coverage of the UAE's human rights situation, said the head of the Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) on Wednesday.

Abdul Gaffar Hussain, president of the EHRA, told reporters that while human rights organisations conducting research in the country were "selective" about who they met and what they reported on, the blame for it also lies with government officials who refuse to meet the researchers.

"If officials don't meet the researchers the researchers will take that bad impression and it will of course be reflected in the reports they write," said Hussain.

He was speaking at the headquarters of the EHRA in Rashidiya at an event that was planned to discuss the UAE chapter of the Human Rights Watch (HRW) annual report. Invitations for the event were sent by the National Media Council but it was chaired by Hussain. No representatives of the NMC were present.

While Hussain said that his organisation disagreed with much of what was said in the report, he stressed repeatedly that the report's authors had good intentions "and have the right to publish that report".

Asked if there was anything in the report that he agreed with, Hussain said he disagreed with most of what was published in it, but specifically noted reservation on the report's criticism of the situation of migrant workers.

"We don't deny that there are certain [human rights] issues that need to be dealt with. But we say that while there are negative aspects to the human rights issues there are also positive ones," he said, referring to what he described as progress in granting human rights in the UAE.

Other targets of HRW report's criticism were the rights of domestic workers in the UAE as well as the country's record on human trafficking and torture. It also criticised the justice system for the indefinite holding of detainees without charge.

When a reporter suggested that the UAE was being "intentionally targeted", Hussain dismissed the charges saying it was part of the development process of any country.

However he criticised HRW representatives in the UAE for "only meeting those who oppose the government's policies" and fail to give the government credit where it is due.

Sameer Muscati, a researcher at the Middle East and North Africa division of HRW, refuted those claims, saying the UAE chapter of the report mentioned new housing standards for labourers.

"We also mentioned the new wage system as a positive development during our press conference as well as in subsequent interviews. It is important to recognise positive developments when they happen," he said.

"Our goal isn't to simply criticise for the sake of criticism. We do so with the goal of creating change and only when it is warranted."

Mention of the new wage system, however, was omitted in the report.

Muscati also echoed Hussain's claim that government officials are not easily accessible.

"Our goal in to have a productive relationship with the government and not just an adversarial one," he said.

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