

FIRST EAST ASIA CONGRESS

MANAGING LABOUR MIGRATION

In East Asia, as in many other parts of the world, the free movement of labour does not match the free movement of capital. This makes the presence of foreign workers a boon and a bane. It is a boon for most workers, their families and sending countries, which enjoy the remittances, but it is a thorny issue for recipient countries, which just want the workers' 'labour' but are unwilling or unable to grant them full social rights. Patrick Pillai reports on Session Seven "Managing Labour Migration" held on 5 August 2003 and chaired by U Hla Maung, Adviser to the Myanmar Foreign Affairs Ministry.

Though permanent and return migration has been a feature in the Malay Archipelago for centuries, in East Asia as a whole it is a relatively new phenomenon. Thus, it is likely to pose even greater cultural social and political challenges.

The speakers threw up several important proposals. One was the need for a legal framework to manage migration in order to reduce movement costs and control exploitation by agents, especially of illegal migrants, particularly women. Another was the need to fully harness established institutions, and ratify and implement current agreements, laws, rules and regulations rather than invent new ones.

Thailand Development Research Institute Research Director Dr Yongyuth Chalamwong, proposed adherence to international labour standards and ratification of international conventions on migrant workers. For him, strict enforcement of existing laws should cover penalties for employers and agents too, and not just for

workers. He also proposed greater interaction among researchers and policymakers, co-operation between receiving and sending countries and among international agencies.

The use of existing initiatives (such as the Bangkok Declaration, bilateral and multilateral agreements for labour migration and technical co-operation in tackling human trafficking) should also be considered.

Vietnam's Economic Adviser to the Ministry of Planning and Investments Prof. Nguyen Quang Thai mentioned that half of Vietnam's 80 million people were below 25 years old. Since 60 per cent of the labour force was still in agriculture and earned only US\$400 a year, the country sent about 400,000 workers abroad, mainly to East Asia. In addition to training in skills, languages and cultural norms, he proposed that all migrants should be covered by social security.

His proposal concerning social security should be seriously considered since it could insure workers against

workplace accidents and ill-health, and act as an incentive for them to return home. Taiwan has a policy whereby a certain portion of foreign workers' savings could only be withdrawn in the home country, after their return. Such a policy can be emulated by other sending countries.

Dr Riwanto Tirtosudarmo, Senior Research Fellow of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, presented a broad analysis of migration trends in the region, seeing them as part of the ongoing process of globalisation. He saw the increase in inequality within and between countries and internal migration as a prelude to cross border migration. While there was recognition of the importance of remittances to the poorer countries and the need to improve laws, rules and regulations, he stated that the causes and impact of migration were inseparable from the issues of global development, human rights, welfare states and the future of societies in the region. His main point was that migration should not be seen in isolation but holistically, as a part of the current development process.

Dr Brenda Yeoh, Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, stated that Singapore's economic prosperity had always existed on a foundation of immigrant labour. In recent years, the government

leveraged on a judicious mix of the quality and quantity of immigrant labour – unskilled workers comprising 'foreign workers' and professional and managerial workers or 'foreign talent' to enhance economic growth. State policy controlled the transient nature of foreign workers' stay through work permits, dependency ceilings, levies and security bonds. She pointed to the need to: (1) create more interaction and promote better relationships between foreigners and Singaporeans, (2) institute wider social support systems, and (3) examine the possible polarisation between the rights and responsibilities of 'foreign workers' and 'foreign talent'.

Dr Yeoh also brought up an interesting, and often overlooked, point. In addition to the often talked about 'brain drain' of professionals and skilled workers, there was also a 'care drain' in the region as a whole. By this she referred to the hundreds of thousands of women who leave home to work as domestic maids in other countries. These women became 'care givers' in receiving countries, but in so doing created a 'care drain' in their own families. The resulting social and psychological impact on their own children and spouses needs further study and attention.

In conclusion, it can be said that the session, on the whole,

provided a sober, down-to-earth and pragmatic analysis of current issues, problems and solutions. The key point is that there was, perhaps for the first time ever, dialogue among diverse nations, particularly the smaller nations in East Asia, and agreement on key issues. Above all, there was a general consensus that we should start utilising current institutions, mechanisms, and models to overcome regional challenges. ●

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