

Conference of manpower exporting countries

Dynamism has to be brought about in political and diplomatic interactions

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

NINE manpower exporting Asian countries -- Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and China -- are expected to form a common forum seeking redress to abuses of immigrant workers in the countries employing them -- Middle Eastern countries, Iran, Malaysia and Brunei. Inspired by the International Organization Of Migration, Ministers of Labour and Overseas Employment of the exporting countries are expected to meet in a conference at Colombo in November this year or between January and March next year. Around one million workers from the five South Asian countries alone migrate to importing countries every year.

Remittances by people working abroad is a good source of foreign exchange earning of the exporting countries. In the case of Bangladesh the amount is significant. In 1998 some three million Bangladeshis were estimated to have sent US\$1.51 billion up from US\$1.34 billion in 1997. Additionally another substantial amount is sent through informal channel or HUNDI. Bangladesh government is trying to improve banking channels to attract Bangladeshis to remit money through banks. It is presumed that similar would be the case in other South Asian countries.

Destination of most migrant workers who are semi-skilled or unskilled are the Islamic countries. This works to the advantage of the exporting Muslim countries or

Muslim workers even if the exporting countries are not Islamic. Having the same religion helps both the employer and the employee to adjust more easily to the extent the social environment is influenced by religion. For example, it is easier for a Muslim worker to keep fast during the month of Ramadan than for a non-Muslim worker. But since foreign workers are not employed to preach Islam but to work in different occupations which have blithe disregard for any religion, expertise in that particular job and knowledge of the local language are far more important. If we take the case of Pakistan as an example, in 1999 out of more than three million Pakistanis abroad, six lakhs were in North America, more than seven lakhs in the UK, more than two lakhs in other European countries, one and a half million in the Middle East and the rest in Far East and other countries. Most of the Pakistanis in developed countries were highly skilled as demanded by the markets of those countries. While those who had gone to the Middle East were either unskilled or semi-skilled mostly. Pakistan also presents a case of reverse immigration. Pakistan sheltered some three and a half million foreigners of which one and half million were Bengalis, two million Afghans and the rest were from Burma, Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka etc (www.scalabrini.asn.au/atlas). The military government of General Parvez Musharraf decided to set up Alien Registration Authority to regularise the stay of the aliens, first by issuing three-year alien registration work permit (now discarded)

and then by issuing work visas. Remittances by Pakistanis abroad to Pakistan is believed to have fallen due to fluid political situation in the country.

While the exporting countries are contemplating to draw up a social contract with the importing countries in order to safeguard the rights of their workers, it would be helpful to try to understand the problems faced by the importing countries as well. Malaysia would provide a typical example. Malaysian government had made several attempts at

Malaysian Trade Union Congress was not opposed to the hiring of foreign labor but advocated check on the entry of these foreigners. Reservation, if any, on hiring of foreign workers were due to outflow of remittances, social costs and social problems. As opposed to the Malaysian example, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder faced stiff opposition to his proposal on issuing green card to foreign IT specialists. It was estimated in 1999 and thereafter that Germany and indeed the

exporting countries' proposed solidarity to frame common position regarding abuses inflicted upon labourers, particularly unskilled semi-skilled and domestic aides. Cases of beatings, rape, non-payment of salary, verbal abuse etc are generally reported. Malaysia attempted to address this problem through extension of Workers' Compensation Act of 1952 to domestic workers making it compulsory for employers to provide them with annual insurance. Malaysia

woes are further compounded by increasing migration-cost levied upon them by the unscrupulous agents in the exporting countries, enroute and importing countries. In many cases many months and even years have to be spent to recoup the migration-cost already incurred by the migrant even before he has started to earn. The migrant worker, in such cases, becomes an indentured labor working without any pay. And should he be deported for any reason then he and his entire family

returned to Malaysia. For the local people illegal immigrants meant competition for small business, rising crime, spread of diseases like HIV, Hepatitis B, leprosy or even cancer.

Mobility of labour -- both legal and illegal -- to North America and Europe has different texture. Most of these migrants are highly skilled, articulate, capable and willing to immerse themselves in modern western political culture. "The real power of the West" writes Ziauddin Sardar "is not located in its economic muscle or technological might. Rather it resides in its power to define. The West defines what is, for example, freedom, progress and civil behaviour.....what is real and what it means to be human. The non-Western civilizations have simply to accept these definitions or be defined out of existence" (Development and Location of Euro-centrism). In his critical view of post-modernism Sardar carries further Vincent Tucker's description of western society's claim on "universal desirability" as "not only cultural elitism but cultural racism". Seemingly eclectic in nature the persistent craving of immigrants from "other civilizations" to sail to the West which promises the apotheosis of political, economic and cultural development is easily understood. From the exporting countries' point of view exodus of such excellence, albeit somewhat halted by the tragic events of Nine-Eleven, is a loss of its present and potential resource in the hope of some silver coins in return. One may question the long term rationale of a

policy which advocates sending one's best in the service of the other who little over a hundred years ago (The General Act of Berlin Conference, 1884-85) pledged "to educate the natives and to teach them to understand and appreciate the benefits of civilization" and in the League of Nations Covenant (article 22) gave the "advanced" nations responsibility for "these people not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" thus giving the Europeans not only the right to conquer and dominate but a duty to do so (The myth of development: A critique of Eurocentric discourse -- Vincent Tucker). Revisiting the bitter memories of the past can only be counter productive. Instead attempts should be made to dissimulate and to take a holistic approach to construct a future for the present and the coming generations.

It would be advisable in the context of the present global melt-down and the west's fear psychosis relating to terrorism for the manpower exporting countries not to remind the importing countries of their infractions of the international labour laws and/or human rights conventions; but to go in for human resource development so that the quality of the exportable i.e. labour excels in the world market. Concurrently dynamism has to be brought about in political and diplomatic interactions between the importing and exporting countries to redress blatant cases of abuse which exceed the threshold of tolerance.

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rationalising its immigration policy. As of February 2000 Malaysia had about seven lakh authorised immigrant workers, the great majority being from Indonesia followed by Bangladesh (one lakh thirty thousand workers). Malaysian government urged manufacturers to shift from labour intensive industries and imposed ban on employment of foreign workers in many categories including paramedics, mechanical engineers, petrol pump attendants, drivers, waiters, waitresses etc. Malaysian Employers Federation urged the government to review this ban so that Malaysians get sufficient time to prepare themselves to switch to the banned sectors.

European Union would need significant number of IT specialists to fill up the gap between domestic demand and supply. While German industry demanded of the government that rules be framed to facilitate the entry of foreign IT specialists German trade unions and the people in general were averse to the idea. Still German Foreign Minister visited India several times to explore the possibility of recruiting IT specialists from India. He failed because of lack of enthusiasm from the Indian side. Reportedly Germany is now trying to fill up the void by taking in people from former East European countries.

It has already been mentioned of

also allowed Foreign Workers Association to negotiate salaries on several occasions. Legal recourse to redress the wrongs committed by the employers is particularly difficult in the Middle Eastern countries. Embedded in archaic legal system where tribal and feudal customs and traditions predate accepted civilized norms of justice and hold sway over all other laws, abuses of imported labour is rampant. Unfortunately for the exporting countries international mobility of labour is dictated by the principles and practices of a buyers' market where supply far outstrips demand. Therefore the exportable i.e. human labour faces all the consequential disadvantages. Their

is doomed to penury. Despite such "depressing present" workers from exporting countries continue their assault on the shores of the importing countries in the pursuit of a "bright future". Malaysian authorities, for example, have carried out periodic operations against illegal immigrants and caught in the net employers providing fake permanent residence permits, trafficking in women for prostitution (women lured with job promises in factories/waitresses), syndicates smuggling Asians and Africans to Western countries using Malaysia as a transit point etc. Such periodic drives had only transient effects as majority of people deported

Murder most foul!

SAGARCHAUDHURY

DOES this heading ring a bell? Connoisseurs of classic detective stories will no doubt recognise it as the title of a story penned by the undisputed queen of mystery writers Agatha Christie, featuring the inimitable lady sleuth Miss Jane Marple. But no, I am not alluding to that fictional tale -- the incident I am referring to concerns a more mundane, real-life tragedy that occurred in a sleepy little village named Soham in Cambridgeshire about eight weeks ago. I have been trying to avoid writing about this incident because its details are too horrific, too distressing for my palate. Two 10-year old girls, Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells, disappeared one afternoon from an area close to their homes. After an initial search failed to unearth any clues to their mysterious disappearance, the police -- as well as the girls' parents -- were forced to conclude that the two youngsters had been kidnapped and a massive manhunt, said to be one of the largest in Britain, was launched. Finally, after combing through miles and miles of countryside, the girls' lifeless mortal remains were discovered in a shallow grave in a woodland adjacent to the village. Further investigation led the police to two likely suspects -- Ian Huntley,

a caretaker working at the school where both Jessica and Holly were pupils, and his girlfriend Maxine Carr, a teaching assistant at the same school. They were arrested and charged with murder and attempting to pervert the course of justice and several days of interrogation made it clear to the police that they were indeed guilty as charged. The first stage in this tragic affair thus came to an end.

Well, the alleged perpetrators of this heinous crime are behind bars now and their trial is under way. In time we will perhaps come to know what perverted motive they had behind this apparently motiveless crime, perhaps not. But the incident has produced serious repercussions on school education system all over the country. Following it, the Government decided to apply a strict vetting system for all teaching and non-teaching staff in order to ensure the safety of school-going children. The Criminal Records Bureau -- CRB -- was instructed by the Home Office to complete the checking and clearing of teachers and teaching assistants before the schools reopened after the summer holidays. The normal business of the CRB is run by a firm named Capita which gave the assurance that the work will be completed in time for the beginning of the new school term and no one who has not been fully cleared by the CRB

will be allowed back in classrooms. But Capita -- or the CRB -- failed to live up to its promise as most schools returned from the summer break to face acute staff shortages caused by the failure to complete the vetting process in time. As a result, scores of schools in Leicestershire, Kent, Surrey, Derbyshire, South Wales and London were forced to turn away more than 10,000 pupils from their classes on the first days of the term. At many schools elsewhere, Headteachers had no choice other than trying to 'juggle' staff, double-up classes and give lessons themselves in order to keep schools

Soham tragedy. The U-turn, therefore, means that Headteachers can use staff who have not had a full CRB check, so long as their names are not on the current Department for Education and Skills register of people considered unsuitable to work with children. All teaching and non-teaching staff, however, will be expected to undergo the fuller check when the system is better able to cope with the crisis, but some checks might not be through until Christmas. Headteachers, unions and even some Labour backbenchers not to speak of the parents have been severely critical of the Government's handling of

unhealthy lifestyles like poor diet, smoking and lack of exercise could have a limiting effect. "No more than a minority of the population will adopt truly healthy lifestyles," says the report.

The experts also fear that Britain's ageing population will pose a serious problem for the country's economy because a rising number of pensioners will become an increasing burden on a smaller working population, with the Social Security system and the National Health Service struggling to care for the elderly, many of whom may have insufficient pension provision. The Dependency Ratio will rise

1990s and found that the psychological support of married life reduces stress levels and helps promote a positive mental attitude. "Forget cash -- it is clear as day from the data that marriage, rather than money, is what keeps people alive," says the leader of the research team, Professor Andrew Oswald: "If you are single, there's often no one there to discuss problems with and often perhaps these people find worries spiralling out of all proportion, which may affect their health." Professor Oswald himself has been married for over twenty-five years and he adds: "I certainly will live longer because of

Bush has, of course, been included for his stirring words uttered in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks on New York, but, in my opinion, he could have as well been chosen for a real gem of a remark he made shortly after he had become President. A few weeks into his Presidency, while speaking at a conference of international environmentalists, he reportedly said: "It is not really pollution that is a problem, it is the impurities in air and water that are of real concern." To this date, no one has been able to make an intelligent guess at what Mr Bush meant by the word 'pollution'.

Here are a few samples of the new entries in the latest edition of the Oxford Book of Modern Quotations:

George W. Bush -- launching 'war on terrorism': *It is time for us to win the first war of the 21st century.*

Tony Blair -- speech after September 11 attacks: *We... stand shoulder to shoulder with our American friends.*

Bill Clinton -- on George W. Bush's controversial Presidential election victory, 2000: *The American people have spoken -- but it's going to take a little time to determine exactly what they said.*

Al Gore -- introducing himself to a student audience in 2001 after his defeat by George W. Bush: *I am Al Gore, and I used to be the next President of the United States.*

Delia Smith -- from her book 'How to Cook': *A hen's egg is... a masterpiece of design, construction and brilliant packaging.*

LONDON LETTER

open, and in a number of rural areas pupils could not get to school because the drivers of school buses had not been cleared and so were not permitted to report for work.

After a week of this chaotic situation, the Government was obliged to make an embarrassing U-turn and the Education Secretary Estelle Morris, after consulting with the Home Secretary David Blunket, scrapped the vetting guidance issued in the wake of the

crisis. As the General Secretary of the Secondary Heads' Association summed up: "It has been a catalogue of chaos from start to finish."

Ageing population

ENOUGH of child killers and administrative bungling. Let us turn to more prosaic, down-to-earth facts of life. The Government Actuary's Department has published a report on the nature and growth of British population titled National Population Projections, which declares that the number of octogenarians is likely to boom to nearly six million in the not-so-distant future. Statistics show that about one in ten of the population will be over 80 years old by the year 2051, with men likely to live to at least 80 and women to at least 84. Some experts believe that children born now may even have an average life expectancy of 88, although

from 620 dependants per 1000 working age people to 700 over the next three decades. Immigration, at the current annual rate, could add as much as 195,000 a year to the UK population for the foreseeable future and this figure includes asylum seekers, students, foreign workers and those marrying UK citizens, not counting the thousands of British people returning to their home country after living or working abroad.

Side by side, the results of another research conducted by the University of Warwick into the causes of longevity indicate that happily married people are likely to live longer than people who are single and wealthier. A good marriage cuts down the risk of death to such an extent that it cancels out the negative effects of smoking, for example. The researchers studied the lifestyles of 10,000 people chosen at random throughout the

it."

UNQUOTEABLE QUOTES

THE Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations was first published in 1991, followed by the Oxford Dictionary of 20th Century Quotations in 1998. The third edition of the volume, to be published by the end of September as the Oxford Book of Modern Quotations, covers subject matters ranging from war and presidential elections to football and eggs! The US President George Bush, his rival Al Gore who almost became the President, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the England football captain David Beckham and Delia Smith, perhaps Britain's most popular culinary expert -- like Bangladesh's very own Siddiq Kabir -- are among the new entrants into the book which covers the period between 1900 and 2001. President