

Legal and illegal migrant workers

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

FIRST, consider the situation of legal migrant workers.

There are close to 200 million migrant workers in the world of which less than 20 percent are classified as refugees. Migrants are people who make a choice on their own to cross national borders, refugees are often pushed, and their movement is involuntary.

Sometimes a distinction is made between economic refugees and political refugees. The former are victims of political repression, the latter are seekers of better opportunities in life. In the United States, as in many European countries, there are constitutional provisions that make it difficult to turn down political refugees if the case of political repression can be established. In any case, the difference between the two types is often blurred.

Second, migrant workers now send more remittance twice, according to the World Bank experts in remittance than official development assistance. Some countries depend on remittance from their workers for economic development. For example, Philippines receives \$12 billion in remittance. India tops the list with \$22 billion. Bangladesh earned \$3.4 billion in 2004 which was the lion's share of export revenues.

According to a recent World Bank paper, a total of \$250 billion will be remitted in 2005 of which \$167 billion went to the developing countries. Of course, it would be one-sided to present development through migration thesis in a rosy fashion, there are problems as well. Brain drain for the poor countries and brain gain for the rich nations is a controversial fact of life. Although one Indian expert once wryly commented: "Brain drain is better than brain in the drain."

Third, the difference between legal and illegal, that is, documented and undocumented workers is also becoming somewhat hazy. In some countries, once legal migrant workers become illegal through a variety of reasons,

whereas in others (for example, US and Italy) illegal migrant workers end up getting legal status through amnesty and other enlightened policy measures.

There are, at least, three points worth noting about illegal migrant workers. First, they are everywhere, second, they represent a large number of countries of origin, and thirdly, with some variation their stories of lack of power, status and exposure to vulnerability are similar. Illegal migrants coexist with legal migrants. Sometimes the transition from one to the other is unclear. One may enter a country as a legal migrant worker and overtime may become illegal. And of course there are people who out of desperation or for better opportunities would resort to risky behaviour and try to enter foreign lands illegally. Some succeed in entering foreign land illegally others even perish in their attempt to do so. Bangladeshis have perished in sea in their bid to enter Europe from Morocco and once an ill-fated but desperate Bangladeshi wanted to hide in the landing gear of a plane as a stowaway. His bid ended in an unmistakeable tragedy.

I had the opportunity of meeting a number of migrant worker activists who told me of the problems of migrant workers in various Asian countries. In most Asian countries, as elsewhere, foreign workers are not unionized. They are not part of the working class and are thus excluded from the rights and wages entitled to the workers. In many places there is no minimum wage. Migrant workers are hired for the simple reason of wage differential. Often migrant workers end up doing "dirty, dangerous, and demeaning" work.

His illegal or undocumented status does not stop him from running a small business in Turin, a telephone call centre of sorts. The business was going on in a place not too far from where I saw some Italian police officers hanging out. In this facility migrants come to make phone calls on the cheap to their homelands. I saw men and women from Vietnam, Philippines, Pakistan, Somalia, apart from Bangladeshi, and a Moroccan who left without paying. He confidently walked out and vanished in the waiting car while Mr. Kabir was out to change a bill. Moroccans, Mr.

a serious problem of illegal migrants and the numbers are low, it is not completely immune to this problem. On November 21, over 100 Bangladeshi workers (of whom only a dozen were legal) were rounded up by Singapore's immigration authority. Many of them were overstayers while others entered Singapore illegally. A well-administered Singapore with strict laws provides a serious disincentive. In other countries, especially in Europe or North America, the problem is huge.

This summer, during a short visit to Italy I was exposed first hand to the issue of "illegal immigrants." I met Mr. Kabir (not his real name) who asked me when did I come and quickly followed up with the question, "Did you come legally or illegally?" I said, somewhat apologetically, "Legally." It immediately became apparent why it was so difficult for me to get an Italian (actually, Shengen visa) on my Bangladeshi passport. I told him that I live in Singapore and got my visa there. "Do you live in Singapore legally or illegally?" Mr. Kabir asked. Of course legally, I protested.

In Mr. Kabir's world there are two types of people: legal and illegal. Mr. Kabir's visa status is yet to be regularized and he is waiting for an amnesty. Somewhat like the Martelli Law of the 1990s which legalized many illegal migrants.

The stories of migration network were similar. They had a brother-in-law in Rome who happens to be a prominent local BNP leader there who helped the two brothers come to Italy. The older brother came shortly before the declaration of amnesty some years back. Mr. Kabir came after a stint in Saudi Arabia and was waiting for the next round of amnesty. Family and kinship continue to play a key part in the overseas migration. A few of the other Bangladeshi in town were also from the same village. The good news of job availability

Kabir told me, accounted for many of the thefts in Turin. The relationship among the foreign migrant workers is less than one of solidarity.

That I was legal in Singapore and entered legally in Italy impressed Mr. Kabir so much that he invited me to his brother's shop half a block away. Kabir's elder brother has legal status in Italy. I was presented as a legal Bangladeshi. An assistant was sent to fetch a coffee for their legal, not to mention lucky, guest. Once the shock of my coming to Italy legally and not wanting to stay back wore off, they asked me about my business and purpose of visit to Italy. I hesitated to tell my new Bangladeshi friends that I was a keynote speaker in an international conference and the evening before had dined with their Mayor and other city elders. I told them something vaguely that I was in a meeting and I am a teacher in a university in Singapore. I was immediately invited for lunch. They would take a "professor" home for lunch. I had to decline the invitation because of some earlier engagement. However, I was treated with utmost kindness and proverbial Bangladeshi hospitality. Before I left, he insisted on giving gifts for my wife and daughter and for me. I managed to decline the rest except the one he gave me, an eau de toilet, Opium for Men which I treasure not just for the sweet smell but for the generosity of the vial embossed.

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reached their community in Bangladesh through the BNP leader.

Most of the jobs the migrant workers are not welcome jobs for the local (Italian) workers. I met a highly skilled Bangladeshi auto worker who was trained in Japan. I struck up a conversation with Mr. Das (not his real name) as he was selling trinkets in one of the lovely plazas in Turin. He came from a Hindu family in Bangladesh where he thought his opportunities for social advancement were limited so he decided to leave his motherland. Mr. Das sells trinkets on weekends and evening hours after work for extra income which he remits to his family in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshis have been coming to Italy for quite some time. Rome became another popular destination in the 1980s. Dr. Melanie Knights, a geographer wrote her doctoral thesis on Migration in the New World Order: The case of Bangladeshi Migration to Rome. In her study, Dr. Knights showed that the rapidly changing geopolitical and economic context of the world has drawn Italy and Bangladesh into a global migratory system. Her study examines the case of Bangladeshi migration to Rome and explores the Bangladeshi migratory network. Her study showed among other things that many educated Bangladeshi migrants adopt illegal means to enter Italy. The fact that there is a vibrant informal economy functioning independently of the Italian labour market helps understand the choice of Rome as a destination. According to the Bangladeshi State Minister for Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, there are 45,719 Bangladeshis in Italy, it is however not known what percentage of this number is illegal.

Bangladeshis since 1980s have fanned out to various destinations in Europe, Asia, and North America, and even to Latin America. Apart from economic



A Bangladeshi worker in Korea, hospitalised with a gangrenous right foot due to diabetes.

reasons, Bangladeshis are bitten by wanderlust. Apart from the refugees who prefer to cross the border to go to India, many Bangladeshis end up being international migrants for a complex set of reasons. Although the economic reason remains dominant, many are allured by the prospect of better living in foreign countries.

The role of mass media, especially satellite television is significant. Many are duped and put to grave risk. Yet some are risking their lives in reaching these destinations on their own. They become vulnerable.

An Italian journalist Mr. Fabrizio Gathi of Centre-Left Italian paper L'Espresso pretended to be an illegal immigrant and took the name of Bilal Ibrahim el Habib only to experience the plight of the illegal immigrants who cross over from across the Gibraltar to enter Italy and then to rest of Europe.

Hundreds of such fortune seekers try to reach the shores of Italy every day to avoid economic deprivations, political repression, or both.

He was mistreated and stayed in dehumanised condition. His whistle-blowing article has already created a furore.

The problem of illegal migrants is not just confined to Italy. In Spain there is an estimated one million illegal immigrants of the total population of 43.2 million. Illegal workers come from Ecuador, Colombia, Romania, etc. Last year (2004) more migrants entered the US illegally than legally. There were 455,000 legal immigrants compared to an estimated 562,000 illegal immigrants. In European Union 650,000 illegal immigrants were ordered to leave last year.

The issues of migration are complex and reflect globalization at its best and ironically -- its worst.

It provides opportunities for not only economic benefits for all, both the receiving as well as destination countries, it also portends cosmopolitanism. Yet, it exposes both the migrant workers to vulnerability and their host countries to "new class struggles" as the recent suburban riots in France have shown. More international dialogue as well as an appropriate legal regime is needed to oversee this process that would not become a hostage to right wing politics or undermine genuine interests of the hosts as well as the workers. Mr. Gathi, the Italian journalist embodied the best in not only decent and fearless journalism in opening a dialogue but also affirmed a vision of common humanity, despite everything.

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The multi-talented Mr. Seth

TALKING BOOKS

Seth, with his gift for characterization, uses his pen like a camera -- zooming in on the tiny details of individual lives then pulling back to broaden his focus to include India in the dying days of the Raj, the rise of Nazi Germany, the Jewish question and its Final Solution and even the genesis and roots of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. But despite the broad canvas on which it is painted this is still an intimate family story and one is constantly amazed at how much of himself Seth is willing to reveal without any sentimentality.

YASMEEN MURSHED

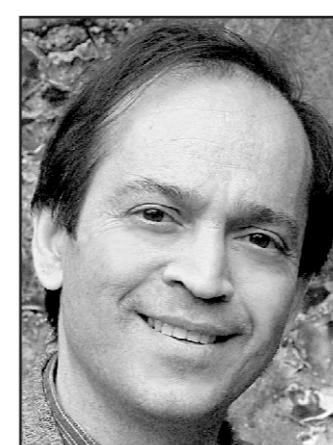
anything. I enjoy abandoning myself in writing, obviously, but also, you know, in hours and hours watching Columbo on TV or late-night American football or whatever." If his obsessions result in this quality of work we, his readers, surely have no objection!

Two Lives begins when, as a young and rather naive seventeen year old, Seth arrived in England after completing his studies at Doon School, for a college preparatory course with the eventual aim of admission to Oxbridge. In keeping with the South Asian tradition of maintaining contact with family no matter where one travels abroad, Seth went to live with his maternal grandfather's brother, "Shanti Uncle" and his German wife, "Aunty Henny." During school holidays and the college years in England carrying on to his long "exile" in America, Seth spent a lot of time with this childless couple and their relationship became warm and loving over the years. It is their stories that Seth recounts in this sensitive and moving biography.

In a recent interview Seth said, "It is the first very personal, non-fictional thing I have written. Non-fiction is intrinsically a more sober thing. You are forced into certain questions and you are right up against reality."

The reality in this case is the "Two Lives" of the book which belong to Seth's great-uncle and aunt but perhaps a more descriptive title would have been "Many Lives" because it is as much Seth's own story as it is the story of his extended family and the friends who touched all their lives in various ways.

Seth's parents played an important part in suggesting this subject for a book and Seth drew extensively on their memories and correspondence as well as his own to put together this memoir-cum-biographical and social commentary. In a brief biographical section he reveals the frustrations and travails of a writer's life that far from being "casual insouciance" is in fact an extraordinary talent that he says, has been nurtured by circumstance rather than any concentrated effort. Seth describes himself as "often crippled by procrastination." He said in an interview that, "I need my natural laziness to be countered by obsession in order to do



Vikaram Seth

as well as meditative makes for fascinating reading. As one reviewer put it: "Seth dwells on identity, exile and alienation, on the de-humanization of racism, and those acts of spontaneous generosity which restore one's faith in humanity."

Seth, with his gift for characterization, uses his pen like a camera -- zooming in on the tiny details of individual lives then pulling back to broaden his focus to include India in the dying days of the Raj, the rise of Nazi Germany, the Jewish question and its Final Solution and even the genesis and roots of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. But despite the broad canvas on which it is painted this is still an intimate family story and one is constantly amazed at how much of himself Seth is willing to reveal without any sentimentality.

For example the last part of the story has poignant and even tragic overtones because after Henny's death Shanti became what can only be described kindly as "eccentric." His slow deterioration as a human being, his descent into senility and dementia and the reaction of family and friends, is described in almost clinical detail but with an empathy that is strangely moving.

Altogether an excellent read, this unusual book with its richness of detail, thought-provoking insights and beautiful but simple prose reaffirms my admiration for Vikram Seth a hundredfold.

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The Eastern Wall

Dispatches from a Palestinian ghetto

JAMAL JUMA

MORE than a year has passed since the Occupation Forces declared the completion of the first section of the Apartheid Wall, running from Jenin to Qalqilia. Rapid construction around Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron marks the second phase of the project. Meanwhile, away from public attention, the Occupation has begun the third phase of the Wall, which will annex and ethnically cleanse the Jordan Valley. Under the rubric of "development," the Valley has become a "Major Governmental Project" for settlement expansion. The result has been the destruction of Palestinian land, increased house demolitions, and the expulsion of Palestinian Bedouins. Recently, two of the four "terminals" controlling Palestinian movement in and out of the area were closed to all Palestinians not residing there, thus completely isolating the northern areas of the Jordan Valley. In the south, "flying checkpoints" exclude Palestinians without residency permits recognised by the Occupation-including landowners. The final step in the annexation of the Valley has begun.

Judaising the Jordan Valley

The Jordan Valley has always been a key target of Zionist expansionism. The Valley comprises over 28% of the West Bank territory and provides access to the water reserves of the River Jordan. The hilltops yield control over a significant portion of the West Bank, providing strategic locations for the effective siege of Palestinians. Today the Jordan Valley, site of the first West Bank settlements, contains 21 colonies held by around 6300 settlers. Recently, they were reinforced by a group of colonizers redeployed from Gaza.

In order to finalise the annexation of the Valley, Zionists have invested \$24 million for "development" over the last two years, with a further \$19 million slated for 2006 to 2008. Extensive land theft forms the backbone of the ethnic cleansing project in the Jordan Valley. Of the 2,400 km of land in the Valley, 455.7 km is

considered "closed military areas," 1655.5 km will be controlled by settlements, and 243 km has been confiscated along the border with Jordan. This leaves only 45 km for Palestinians.

The 2% of the Jordan Valley that remains will consist of a ghetto around Jericho and a cluster of small, isolated villages without land, in other words, the conditions for a catastrophic Palestinian exile.

The expulsion of the Palestinian population

Because they dwell on large areas of land, Palestinian Bedouins have been a central target of the Occupation since 1948, when 50,000 Bedouins were expelled from the Negev (Naqab) desert. Today, the remaining Bedouins in the Negev and the Jordan Valley face an imminent threat of definitive expulsion.

Recently, the Occupation issued a series of military orders for the expulsion of Bedouins, the demolition of Palestinian homes, the confiscation of Palestinian land, and the expansion of Jewish settlements.

In April 2005, Occupation Forces expelled 300 Palestinian families (1500 persons) from east of Tubas and stole 10,000 dunums of land. Southeast of Bethlehem, the Occupation expelled 6 families, stole 20 water wells, and destroyed 20 shelters used for around 22,000 sheep and 500 camels. Later, hundreds of Bedouins in Sawahreh Al-Sharkiya, near the centre of the Valley, were ordered to abandon 25,000 dunums of land. The Apartheid Wall will now isolate them from an area extending from Sawahreh at the outskirts of Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and up to the north of Jericho.

For months, sheep grazing on confiscated land have been regularly "detained" by the Occupation and the owners penalised with massive fines, Palestinian shepherds reported the outright theft of sheep.

The confiscation of land and isolation of the Jordan Valley, along with the harassment of shepherds, is systematically destroying the Palestinian livestock industry and depriving our people of yet another source of income.

House destruction is another element of the Zionist plan. Dozens of houses have already been demolished in the Jordan Valley. Four family homes have been demolished in both Jiftlik and Fasayel. For years, all construction has been forbidden for the 1500 inhabitants of Fasayel and the village has been denied access to infrastructure for water and electricity. In addition, villagers resist regular harassment and attacks from nearby settlements.

A total disaster threatens to engulf Al-Akaba village. 700 of its 1000 inhabitants were expelled after the 1967 war. The Occupation arbitrarily detains the remaining population in the nearby military camp and confiscates livestock and ID cards.

Now, the village council has received 16 demolition orders covering most buildings in the village, including the kindergarten, health centre, mosque and power station.

Meanwhile, settlement construction and expansion is colonising the newly confiscated areas. Three months ago, settlers from Rotam fenced-off 1000 dunums of land. Miskiyot colony is expanding and bulldozers are working relentlessly to prepare land and infrastructure for a new colony in the northwest of the Valley.

Settlement activity was bolstered when the Occupation ministry of Housing published tenders for 700 new units in two major settlements. Furthermore, the Occupation has approved a huge agricultural project, including access to wide tracts of land, free water, and \$22 million of subsidies to seduce new settlers.

The third phase of the Apartheid Wall project

Racist occupation laws and a "development" scheme for the colonisation of the Jordan Valley create a horrible reality of expulsion and ghettoisation, known all too well throughout the West Bank. Fenced-in roads, military zones, settlements, checkpoints, trenches and roadblocks are contiguously deployed in a form that mirrors the cement walls enclosing Palestinians from the west.

While Palestinians in the Jordan Valley are forced to live in shacks and host entire schools in

tents, Zionist settlers are building a new era of racist dispossession, oppression and expulsion. The final aim is to ensure that the region, once emptied of its Palestinian population, becomes a major Zionist strategic asset and provides large-scale agricultural and natural resources to sustain their economy and expansion. In the south, construction of the eastern Wall has begun near Ezzariya and will soon encircle Bethlehem and Hebron from the east and cut the West Bank in two.

While Palestinian governmental representatives are invited to the tables of global diplomacy, the Palestinian people are systematically being ghettoised. Physical isolation is part of the plan to fragment the Palestinian struggle and build walls between our struggle and the struggle for Arab self-determination.

The noose around the neck of the Palestinian people is rapidly tightening.

While the ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem destroys the urban centre of Palestine, the annexation and isolation of the Jordan Valley is depriving Palestinians of their land, water resources, agricultural and livestock production.

In the face of this reality, the frenzied debates about whether new Labour leader Peretz is a "peace dove" within the Zionist camp to promise a "Palestinian state" seem outlandish. These debates aim merely to silence the urgent Palestinian call to isolate Apartheid Israel and avert the world's attention from the ongoing colonisation of Palestinian land, a process that has always been fervently carried out by both Labour and Likud administrations. At this stage, a two state solution might be theoretically controversial; but it has become practically impossible. Negotiations for statehood without borders, a capital, or land merely deceive our people and the rest of the world.

The author