

## Manpower export

K. Z. ISLAM

I must congratulate Helal Ahmed Chowdhury, Managing Director of Pubali Bank, for coming up with a very innovative scheme for funding the prospective job seekers abroad. A substantial number of the expatriate wage earners are victims of the unscrupulous manpower agents who extract substantial sums from job seekers for employment abroad. Pubali Bank has initiated an expatriate lending project whereby the bank will advance money to the prospective job seekers who will repay the loan from their remittances.

I do have some personal experience regarding manpower export. It just so happens that when Bangladesh commenced exporting manpower and introduced the manpower license system my license number was number one. That is to say that I was the first to get hold of a manpower export license.

I was under the impression that we would be paid by the company that recruited workers from Bangladesh. I soon found out that it was the other way round. I had to pay money to the agents of the company-recruiting workers. Naturally, this had to be borne by the aspirant of a foreign job.

Since I could not accept the

situation I surrendered my license. Some years later, when I started contracting work in the Emirates, I got a fresh license and I took at least 500 skilled workers and engineers without any charge, including payment of their airfare.

I happened to be to the promoter director of Al-Baraka Bank with the Dallah Group of Saudi Arabia as the foreign partner. Every year, at least four board meetings used to be held in Jeddah and, over the years, I attended at least 20 such meetings.

I found the Dallah Group to be a very enlightened business conglomerate working in at least a dozen countries. They were a large employer and did not charge any money from the recruits. From the Bangladesh side, we have Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), which is supposed to act as the recruiting agent in Bangladesh.

I am not familiar with the proportion of workers that go abroad through the BOESL, but I would imagine it would be a small fraction only. Also, BOESL simply does not have the funding and the facilities needed to contact all prospective employers abroad and to search for avenues of employment in new countries.

When we were working in Abu Dhabi, the Labour Counsellor in the Bangladesh Embassy would

frequently request us for transport if he wished to visit Dubai. In other words, the embassy did not have cars or funds for the Labour Counsellor to visit prospective employers and, if possible, take them out for dinner.

This is probably the situation in every Bangladesh Embassy abroad. Therefore, this calls for the involvement of some agencies that would promote employment of Bangladesh workers, particularly skilled ones, in the large number of prospective employer countries. In this matter the government may give all facilities to BOESL, and maybe also involve NGOs like Brac and Grameen Bank to promote employment of Bangladesh workers abroad.

The whole question of manpower export has been analysed by the Royal Danish Embassy, Dhaka, in their report Vision 2015, Bangladesh as a leading manpower exporter January 2008, and by Bangladesh Enterprise Institute in their study September 2007 on Policy and Public Benefit Interventions, to help Bangladesh achieve annual migrant remittances of \$ 30 billion by 2015, and also in a report by India Institute of Management Calcutta September 2007.

From these reports it can be seen that the possibilities of manpower export are enormous. For example, there is a worldwide shortage of

qualified nurses, and Bangladesh has got practically millions of unemployed women. Other skilled workers like carpenters, plumbers, auto-mechanics, air-conditioning technicians, and so the list goes on. Also qualified technical workers like IT engineers, computer experts etc.

We have to acknowledge that Bangladesh is practically surviving on the remittances of Bangladesh workers. The total remittance in the year 2006-2007 was \$ 5979 million, and the remittance for the period July-December 2007 was \$ 3447 million. In other words, for the year 2007-2008 the remittance is likely to exceed \$ 7 billion. Unfortunately, although the government and the country are reaping huge benefits from wage earners' remittances, not enough is being done to administer the whole business of manpower export, which is really the goose that is laying the golden egg.

On January 10, 2008, I was travelling to Karachi by PIA. In the 30 seats of the Business Class there were only 5 genuine business class passengers and the rest were workers. There were 2 captains sitting behind me, and when I enquired if the other passengers had paid the full business class fare the captains replied in the affirmative.

I talked to the person sitting beside me and asked him about the purpose of his journey. He said that



Future expatriates?

he was going to work as a labourer in Abu Dhabi and would be paid only 650 Dirhams per month. I recalled that in 1990 we were paying our workers a minimum salary of 1250 Dirhams.

On further enquiry I found out that the person next to me had neither any schooling nor vocational training. He had paid Tk 2.5

lacs for the job. Two things are revealed in this disclosure -- the worker was not skilled and it would take him at least 5 years to recover his investment. The nexus of agents in Bangladesh and abroad would be the main beneficiaries.

Unless we break this nexus our skilled workers, who might command better salaries but cannot

pay the premium, are deprived from the jobs and, secondly, a considerable amount of foreign exchange is paid through the backdoor to the agents abroad. All this money would have come to Bangladesh as workers' remittances.

If one examines the whole manpower business in depth one

would find numerous underhanded dealings, both by our recruiting agents and the agents abroad. False passports, false visas, false recruitments proliferate on our side. And overseas, if a company has 100 vacancies the foreign agents may take out permission for 1000 vacancies, and our workers who land up in the foreign country are left stranded without a job. We read frequently about these happenings in the newspapers.

Presently, almost all job seekers are hostage to the unscrupulous recruiting agents in Bangladesh and also to their counterparts in the country of employment. Actually, most large companies and government agencies abroad do not charge any money from the workers they employ.

The lower employees of the overseas companies tie up with some local agents and charge money for any recruitment. The entire business of manpower export requires review and professional management as Bangladesh can benefit much more than we are at present. The reports mentioned above should be studied and the measures suggested implemented.

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## How deep in the hearts of Texas?

ARIAN CAMPO-FLORES

THIS was one fired-up crowd. At a rally for Sen. Hillary Clinton at St. Mary's University in San Antonio last Wednesday, thousands of people erupted with euphoria. They cheered, they chanted, they stomped their feet.

Many a time, I've seen Clinton grab hold of such fervor and wrestle it into submission, beat it down with so many 10-point plans and monotonous "I believe" that the multitudes finally collapse into a stupor. But not these rapturous souls. Clinton mentioned her fondness for hot peppers (preferably jalapeños, which she thinks have medicinal properties), and they roared.

She vowed to pull the troops out of Iraq, and they roared. Even when she got to the part about her "35 years of experience" and her many, many policy proposals, they roared. More than once, audience members shrieked, "We love you, Hillary!"

It was a good sign for Clinton. With her campaign flagging and Sen. Barack Obama surging, she's making her last stand in the Texas and Ohio contests on March 4. Before the polls even closed in the Potomac primary last Tuesday, she was heading to the Lone Star State, where she campaigned in El Paso, McAllen and Robstown before reaching San Antonio. "Meet me in Texas," she said, challenging Obama. "We're ready."

Her roots in the state, as she never fails to remind voters, reach far back. One of her national co-chairs, Raul Yzaguirre, remembers

meeting Clinton in 1972, when she went to south Texas to register Hispanic voters for George McGovern. "It was a bit of a culture clash," he says, recalling the blond, bespectacled young woman who asked him how to make tamales. When her husband was president, she visited repeatedly, and over the years she's become steeped in Tejano culture.

The border area holds the most promise for her, with its rich reservoir of Latino voters -- a group

that's been a base of support. Hidalgo County, home to McAllen, is 90 percent Mexican-American and a place where the old-timers used to place two photos on the mantel: one of the pope and one of JFK.

"We're the bluest part of a Red State," says Jerry Polinard of the University of Texas-Pan American. "When we talk about building a fence down here, we talk about building one on the north to keep the Republicans out." But under



Hillary Clinton on the Lone Star campaign trail.

the state's inscrutable delegate-allocation system, this heavily Hispanic area will have comparatively fewer delegates to award. So Clinton will have to compete for voters all over: liberals in Austin, old-line Democrats in the middle, blacks in Houston and Dallas, and rural traditionalists east and west.

Last week, though, her attention was focused on Hispanics. With good reason: many of them adore her. They equate the Clintons with good economic times, the fight for universal health care and cabinet appointments for Tejanos. At the rally in Robstown, one placard read: hillary first Latina president. "Latinos are unusually brand-loyal," says Henry Cisneros, a Clinton backer who was the mayor of San Antonio and a cabinet member in her husband's administration. "It's really an incredible bonding, almost like a family."

Obama, on the other hand, is largely unknown. Paul Elizondo, a county commissioner in San Antonio who's endorsed Clinton, breaks it down in Spanish: "Down here, *con la gente* (with the people) ... Obama is not recognized through the rank-and-file *raza*," he says. "We have a saying here: 'El no trae nada.' He's never done anything for anybody here."

Of course, not all Hispanics love Clinton. In San Antonio, I paid a visit to Lionel Sosa and his wife, Kathy. Sosa is a godfather of Latino marketing, and the couple have crafted countless Hispanic ad campaigns, including those for George W. Bush. Among some Latinos, "there's a sense Hillary will tell you what you need to

hear," Sosa told me over coffee at the Watermark Hotel. "She has all those robotic, rehearsed gestures, the wide eyes and smile."

A supporter of Sen. John McCain's, he's already itching to cut one ad in particular. He opened his Mac and pulled up recent footage of McCain in Livonia, Mich., where the senator fired back at a heckler who criticized his immigration stance. "Have (Clinton and Obama) stood up for the Latino?" asks Sosa. "Neither of them has. McCain has, front and center."

From there, I went to visit Rosalinda Huerta. The day before, Clinton had stopped by her tidy bungalow in the middle-class Mexican-American area of Woodlawn as part of a neighborhood canvass and photo op. I wanted to see if Clinton had won Huerta's vote. Sweet yet steely, Huerta, 77, had no shortage of opinions. On TV, she said, Clinton struck her as cool and rigid and much too preoccupied with touting her accomplishments.

Huerta was also thoroughly turned off by Bill Clinton's attacks on Obama in South Carolina. "I was very disappointed," she said. "It was like he was taking over -- no, no, no." But after seeing Hillary in person, Huerta's view softened: "She looked so affectionate. I didn't know she was like that." Though Huerta said she had been leaning toward Obama before, Hillary "pulled it even again." Perhaps on Clinton's next tour through Texas, she'll manage to seal the deal.

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## Security fears shadow Pakistan party leaders

RAVI VELLOO

HUGE explosions of crackers rent the air, booming from rooftops and the tower of a water tank that looms over this heartland town in Pakistan's all-important Punjab province. Nobody winces, much less looks up.

Such is the casual attitude that permeates the air as streams of people led by men carrying banners showing the tiger, the electoral symbol of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, approach the rally venue, a playground.

A 20m-wide area around the stage, where the candidates and party leader Nawaz Sharif are to speak, has been kept clear. Commandos with 'No Fear' painted on their jackets eye the crowd behind the barricades.

But that is about all. Entry checks at the grounds are all too cursory. My PDA and tape recorder do not get noticed, much less checked. There is no jamming of cellphone signals, often used by terrorists these days to trigger remote bombs. My phone rang when I was onstage within hand-shaking distance from Sharif.

Sharif, a former prime minister, does not wear a bulletproof vest. His secretary quips: "No politician can afford to look like a coward before his people."

But the security risk facing Pakistani politicians is all too real. On Dec 27, charismatic politician Benazir Bhutto was assassinated while campaigning in the garrison town of Rawalpindi outside the national capital Islamabad. Several

others have been killed since.

That's one reason why Jahangir Badar, secretary-general of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), shows up unannounced for campaign walkabouts. It limits the crowds he can gather, but there is little choice.

Arriving in Lahore's famed Anarkali Bazaar to campaign, he plunged into the narrow alleyways and streets of the town's centre of commerce. Crowds began to build behind him, shouting his name. Shopkeepers pressed shawls and paintings on the 60-year-old former school boxer, a Bhutto family loyalist for four decades.

As his procession wound its way through the market, a woman was heard ordering her daughter off the street with the warning, "What if a suicide bomber should be around?"

Other women were seen sobbing as they chanted the Bhutto name. Badar appears set for an easy passage and opinion polls are predicting a big win for the PPP.

Past midnight, Badar is home with his family, a masseur giving his aching legs a rub.

"Every night he is back, we count our blessings," said his son Jehanzeb, who runs a marketing company in Lahore.

Nawaz Sharif, meanwhile, is aware of the deep sympathy for Bhutto's party even in his traditional stronghold of Punjab. He was in Chakwal to back its national assembly candidate Ayaz Amir, Pakistan's famed columnist and television personality.

He need not have bothered, as the sitting candidate, who belongs

to the party that backs President Pervez Musharraf, has declined renomination. Plus, he is campaigning for Amir -- testimony to the President's eroding popularity.

The cricket-loving Sharif's speeches can be as punchy as his hard-hitting batting style.

Most of his barbs are targeted at President Musharraf, whom he tried to fire as army chief in 1999, leading to a coup in which Sharif himself lost power, followed by exile. "What kind of man is this, who takes his orders from the US Secretary of State, and that too a woman," he stormed, referring to President Musharraf and Condoleezza Rice.

He also referred to scientist Dr AQ Khan, seen as the father of Pakistan's nuclear programme, who was placed under house arrest for his proliferation activities. "In India they made the father of their bomb the national president," he said in a reference to rocket scientist APJ Abdul Kalam.

"Here, our Dr Khan was forced by Musharraf to apologise to the nation. I say, leave him alone!"

Speech over, he steps off the stage and into a waiting Toyota Land Cruiser. The engine hums to life, escort cars move ahead, an ambulance follows.

Amir is mobbed as he turns to return to his ancestral home in the Chakwal bazaar. Though he is standing on a ticket issued by Sharif's party, Amir remains sceptical of him and other politicians.

"This is the best leadership we can offer," he shrugs expressively.

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## The World Bank and India

DEVESH KAPUR

RECENT revelations of widespread corruption in World Bank health programs in India have led to the usual expressions of outrage. Like the policeman in "Casablanca" professing shock that gambling was going on at Rick's, the World Bank and the Indian government expressed pro forma shock as well.

The revelations go beyond details of the specific programs, revealing more about the World Bank and India. The bank is more interested in being seen as doing good, and countries like India play along, with little impact on the poor for whom the programs are intended.

Since the 1950s, India has rolled out more targeted poverty programs than almost any other country. Yet, successful targeted poverty programs in India have been a rarity, if the yardstick is replication over space and time. Each new program is successful when applied in a specific location over a fixed period.

Over time, as they expand across states, they begin to fail. Over the decades, literally hun-

dreds of reports from India's Comptroller and Auditor General say pretty much what the World Bank's audits now report.

Like Sisyphus pushing the rock uphill, the Indian government has persisted in pouring tens of billions of dollars into these programs with inputs from the best and brightest in India and abroad. This year alone total spending on all these programs will be around \$40 billion, but only a small fraction will actually reach the poor.

While politicians have an obvious interest in pushing these programs, a range of other actors -- NGOs, aid agencies, multilateral organisations and academics -- have also acquired a vested interest in these programs. Leading the pack is the World Bank.

Since the Bank has made poverty its raison d'être, and no country has more poor people than India, the two have obvious reasons for deep engagement. But the World Bank-India relationship is unique, stemming both from India being the bank's largest borrower and from the perceived sophistication of Indian policymakers and their ability to articulate programs, as distinct

from ability or willingness to implement them.

The reality is that India has always been treated more favourably than most other borrowers. In the past, India's democracy, the exigencies of the Cold War, extreme poverty and eloquent interlocutors long made the country the poster child for development aid -- and in the Bank's case, raising resources for its soft-loan arm, the International Development Association.

Analytical work on India has been one of the World Bank's singular strengths, but it shied away from criticising the country's implementation record, fearing that would weaken the case for IDA. In holding itself back, the Bank became deeply implicated in the failures of India's poverty programs.

These failures are more glaring given the visibility of the Bank's recent anti-corruption over-drive. This has meant countless papers, conferences and a profusion of rules and bureaucratise. But to what end? Consider the Indian health projects. Even if one were to make the heroic assumption that the Bank can ring-fence its pro-

jects, these are but a small fraction of overall health spending in India. Nearly four-fifths of all health spending in India is private out-of-pocket -- far more important, but conveniently ignored.

And even if there's no corruption in procurements, doctors and nurses don't show up -- a chronic problem in Indian public-service delivery. Do such projects really improve the health of India's poor? So much of what the Bank does is to make itself look virtuous to its major shareholders rather than to produce long-term development outcomes.

India's politicians and bureaucrats, like their counterparts elsewhere, blithely run circles around the Bank, knowing they will be around long after the most well-meaning Bank staff have moved on to new programs.

Regrettably, the Bank -- aided and abetted by major shareholders -- has conflated what's good for poverty reduction with what it should do. In reality, the Bank's poverty projects are rarely better than the implementation capacity of local public administration, and the Bank cannot micromanage thousands of oper-

ations without itself expensively substituting for state machinery.

The more it tries to ensure fiduciary control, the more it undermines efforts at self-reliance in areas that are the most basic responsibilities of any government. And the fungibility of public expenditures means that the substitution effects extend to overall patterns of government spending. If a country is unwilling to act vigorously on its own behalf in matters of primary education and health, then it is clearly uninterested and deserves little support from the international community. And if a country is unable to undertake these basic tasks, then the problem is much deeper.

The broader poverty goals would be better served if the Bank reached an understanding with countries like India, whereby the country would strive to provide citizens with key elements that address the needs of poor citizens -- especially basic education and health, water and sanitation -- and in return the institution would fund the complementary inputs for development.

Most poverty projects do not require foreign capital or great foreign expertise. By incessantly confusing what's good for development with what the Bank should be engaged in, borrower countries get saddled with poverty projects, with multiple criteria and implementation standards, often with little effect.

In India's case, the state's inability to discharge this most basic obligation to its citizens in education and health, even as it seeks to be a global power, is a troubling portent of the country's future. While India is not a failing state, it is, to evoke economist Lant Pritchett, a "failing" state.

While the implementation capacity of the Indian state has always been its Achilles heel, these weaknesses become more glaring as the private-sector economy powers ahead. Malnutrition in India is higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. More than half of children aged 7 to 14 in rural India cannot read a simple paragraph of second-grade difficulty.

Infant and maternal mortality rates are awful, even as the nation proudly exports more doctors abroad than any other country and promotes a thriving medical-

tourism industry.

The reasons for these failures are manifold, but ultimately have to do with the troubling condition of the Indian state at all levels. The failures are not just due to poor incentives but to weak abilities in the quality of the human capital of public officials. Compared to the past, fewer people with talent join state institutions, and there's no sign that the state can or will do much about it.

With power now residing at the sub-national level, state politicians have little incentive in decentralising power to local governments lest they lose control of rents. Little wonder that employees who do not show up to work and yet collect a good salary are rarely disciplined. Why take responsibility when the bogymen of neoliberalism and globalisation are so handy? The failings of the Indian state to deliver basic goods and services are a specter that haunts the country -- ignored by the hoopla of India's high growth rates.

The World Bank's well-intentioned efforts -- and it is by no means alone -- exacerbate the

problem. It could be argued that this would mean abandoning millions of desperate poor people. Could the Bank not, instead, give grants to the many committed NGOs and other civil-society organisations that try to reach out to India's poor?

Attractive in the short-term, such a plan is dangerous in the long term since it further weakens incentives for the Indian state to discharge its responsibilities to its citizens.

The abject failure of the Indian state to improve the quality of life of hundreds of millions of its citizens is as unconscionable as it is deeply rooted in the country's political economy. Any solution squarely lies there. Perhaps the biggest error the Bank has made in India has been not to walk away earlier, and realise that non-lending might serve the country -- especially its poor -- better.

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