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Reviewing initiatives for migrant well-being

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2015 has been an important year for the labour migration sector in Bangladesh. In contrast to preceding years, the year has seen a major boost in the outward flow of Bangladeshi workers. It was also marked by substantial increase in the flow of female workers. The decision to review the ill-conceived Government-to-Government (G2G) initiative with Malaysia was accompanied by a gradual increase in the flow of migrants to that country and tapering of the flow through irregular routes. In 2015 Bangladesh was bestowed with the privilege of hosting the Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2016—the largest annual congregation of governments and civil society activists concerned with migration and development issues.

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Since the early 1990s, successive governments in Bangladesh have recognised the importance of labour migration for the national economy. Such a realisation had resulted in a number of important legislative and institutional initiatives that, among other things, led to the establishment of a separate Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment; the setting up of the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund; the framing of the Overseas Employment Policy; the ratification of the 1991 UN Convention on Migrant Workers and Members of their Families; the gradual lifting of the ban/restrictions on female labour migration; allowing of micro-finance institutions to be the last leg of remittance transfer; and the creation of the Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB-Migrants' Welfare Bank) and the enactment of Overseas Employment and Migration Act, 2013.

Perhaps, the time has come for a critical appraisal of those initiatives. The experiences of the last two and a half decades indicate that not all those efforts have achieved their desired outcomes. Some merit serious objective review.

The Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (EWOE) Ministry needs to be shored up with personnel and resources for upholding its mandate to protect Bangladesh's migrant work force in the destination countries, particularly those in the Gulf states. Under the past leadership, its plan to engage in manpower business was in direct conflict with its mandated regulatory role. The failure of the national leadership to provide strategic direction and ensure policy coherence and co-ordination between the Ministry of EWOE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been a major factor in the lack lustre performance. It is about time that the EWOE ministry and its line agency, the Bureau of Manpower and Training (BMET), take stock of their performance and chart appropriate action plans to meaningfully serve the labour migrants. The ministry was set up in response to a concerted and protracted demand of the civil society. The reason for its existence and growth has only enhanced as labour migration continues to make burgeoning contributions at the national, community and migrant household levels.

When it was set up the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) was hailed as a novel example for harnessing resources for migrants. An overwhelming bulk of the Fund comes as direct contribution of the outbound migrants. Although the Fund was created for the welfare of the migrants, successive administrations have made imprudent use of the Fund by spending it on heads that were of little or no direct benefit to the migrants or members of their families. The only major head where the Fund was beneficial to migrants was to pay for burial costs and one time grant to the members of the deceased migrants. Otherwise, resources of the Fund were used on heads that were should have been sourced from the state's exchequer. The Fund was used for renovation of the offices of the Ministry, purchase, maintenance and fuel costs of vehicles of the Ministry and missions abroad, financing overseas trips of senior functionaries,

arbitrary grant to schools, purchase of land for housing of Bangladeshi expatriates, construction of a hostel complex, and purchase and maintenance of equipment such as air-cooler, generator, computer, photocopier and fax machines. As much as Tk. 87 crore was spent on Migrant Welfare Building (that currently houses the Ministry), Tk. 70 crore for the ill-fated Bhatara housing project, Tk. 30 crore for database project and Tk 17 crore for the smart card project. Of the Tk. 700 crore amount spent, only Tk. 265 crore was spent on heads that had some relevance to the migrants. In addition, when PKB was launched the government channelled Taka 95 crore from the WEWF to it as capital. Only Tk. 5 crore was sourced from the public exchequer. News reports inform that recently the government has decided to redirect an additional amount of Tk. 300 crore for the PKB. One may therefore argue that there is a strong case for bringing about accountability and transparency to the WEWF. Immediate steps should be taken so that expenditures on heads other those that are of direct benefit to the migrants are stopped. Also an independent audit needs to be commissioned to ensure public scrutiny and representatives of migrants be appointed in the management of the Fund.

One of the major achievements of the Awami League government in its previous tenure was the ratification of the 1990 UN Convention on Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. However, since then little progress has been made to bring about meaningful changes in the legislative and administrative frameworks to reflect Bangladesh's adherence to the international treaty. The concerned agencies of the government, particularly the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment and Ministry of Foreign Affairs must co-ordinate their efforts so that the ratification follow-up tasks are completed. Responsibility also lies on the civil society organisations to exert pressure on the government to deliver on its commitment that arises out of the ratification process.

Over the years, female labour migration from Bangladesh has gained momentum. The demand for women workers in the Gulf States and south-east Asian countries for domestic help, clean-

ers, care providers for the young and the elderly, and also in the manufacturing sector such as readymade garments and electronics have opened up new vistas of opportunity for Bangladeshi women. However, media reports inform that many women migrants, particularly those working in the domestic sphere, were subjects of abuse of their employers. Organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented patterns of such abuse. The Bangladesh government is keen to access the Saudi market. More so, because the Saudi government has made opening up of male labour market contingent upon Bangladesh providing female workers. Under the circumstances, it is incumbent on our government to provide appropriate training to the female migrants. The training should not only have components on appropriate skill development, but also on protection. In addition, the government must also deliver on its promise to ensure that all female domestic workers are provided with mobile phones to report cases of abuse and set up shelter homes in major countries of destination where they can seek refuge. Zero tolerance of violence and abuse of our women workers in the countries of destination should be pursued in letter and spirit.

Probashi Kallyan Bank has been touted to be a major achievement of the current government. It was launched with due fanfare at the Colombo Process meeting in April 2011. Augmenting the flow of remittances, advancing loan to out-bound migrants and loan for reintegration efforts of returnee migrants were set out to be the three principal objectives of PKB. Since its inception only 13,800 people were provided with migration loan. RMMRU's Migration Trends Report (2015) informs that only 1 percent of the migrants who went overseas in 2015 could secure such loan. It further enlightens that as low a number of 18 returnee migrants have secured reintegration loans from the bank. An objective assessment of the performance of the PKB would make it amply clear that the bank is a non-performer. The decision to open as many as 48 branches has put enormous strain on the viability of the institution. The Bangladesh Bank, as well as the con-

cerned Ministry, should consider instituting independent evaluation to see if the PKB as an institution has a reason to exist in its current form. The civil society should also raise its voice in unison to demand a halt to the proposed transfer of an additional of Tk. 300 crore from the WEWF to the PKB.

In response to long drawn demand of the civil society, during its last tenure the Awami League government enacted the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act, 2013 replacing the age-old 1982 Emigration Act. The new Act is an improvement on the previous law. However, it fell short of the expectations of the civil society, as the Act accorded very little rights to the migrants and incorporated contradictory provisions that opened up opportunity for the wrong doers to go unpunished. It also remained silent on accountability of the government functionaries. So far, there has been very little effort to put the provisions of the Act into practice. The non-application of the Act against the human smugglers and traffickers who facilitated movement through maritime route via Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea is a stark example. Lack of awareness of the Act among the members of the Bar, officials of the judicial service and law enforcement agencies has been a major impediment in its implementation. The government needs to act on the recommendations of the civil society institutions, particularly the RMMRU, for bringing about amendments to the Act that has become necessary.

Labour migration is an important lifeline for the Bangladesh economy and society. The legislative and administrative initiatives discussed above have begun to lay bare their inadequacies and limitations. In a competitive global labour market if Bangladesh wants to make significant advances, instead of being complacent on the past actions, time has come for the government to reassess some of those initiatives. If need be, independent reviewers may be appointed and necessary amendments should be made so that the migrants can enjoy the benefits of those well intentioned initiatives and the nation as a whole can gain from their mobility.

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