

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

Reintegration must be a pillar of labour migration

ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE



C R ABRAR

DECEMBER 18 marks the International Migrants Day. While the day provides an occasion to celebrate the contributions of migrants to their households, communities, and the countries of origin and destination, it also provides an opportunity to the policymakers and other stakeholders to reflect on how to create enabling conditions for migrants—many of whom spend the prime years of their lives away from their loved ones—to maximise the gains and minimise the harms of migration. Thus, on this day, along with celebrating their contributions, one needs to recognise that effective reintegration of temporary migrant workers is the pathway for a sustainable migration experience.

In the past, little attention has been given by the countries of origin on the return and rehabilitation of short-term migrant workers. Their principal focus has been exploring new markets for deployment and establishing mechanisms for safe and orderly migration. In the race to secure higher volumes of remittances, policy focus has largely been regularising the recruitment channel. In such a context, there has been a palpable gap in policy and programme intervention on the return and reintegration of labour migrants. Perhaps the only exception in the Bangladeshi context has been those that are targeted towards irregular migrants in Europe.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of many weak groups—and migrant workers are one of them. The pandemic triggered reverse migration of a large number of temporary workers to their countries of origin. While some workers returned voluntarily, a large number was subjected to involuntary return. The countries of origin were ill-prepared to receive the returnee migrants. Their experience of reception at the airports and quarantine centres were far from satisfactory. Discrimination in treatment was rife between travellers and migrants who returned from the Western countries and those from the Gulf and other Arab states. The sudden presence of returnee workers—many of whom came empty-handed—exerted

additional burden on the households and the communities that were already reeling under the pandemic conditions. In many cases, migrants faced stigma—at times caused by imprudent decisions such as marking their residences with red flags—as the likely bearers of the contagion. In some areas, migrants were subjected to harassment—eviction threats from houses and being refused services—and beating. There was a total absence of psychological counselling available to migrants. The lack of appropriate plans to address

Given the recent Covid-19 experiences, there is a strong case to consider reintegration as an integral pillar of migration governance that demands no less importance than deployment and recruitment. An effective reintegration plan covering access to livelihood and social protection necessitates a holistic and inclusive approach.

The reintegration plan should address specific needs of various categories of migrants, including (but not necessarily limited to) those who (a) have been reasonably successful in

is a major problem. There may be a need for specialised skills in the local market, but the returnee migrants who acquire specialised skills may not be able to link with the local job market. There is also a need for re-training the returnees who wish to learn new trades.

Likewise, returnee migrants with small savings may lack access to bank and microfinance institutions. Those interested in enterprise development may require financial literacy, business ideas, and sufficient capital to start a business, and also entrepreneurial skills and support to market their products. Income generation programmes should be planned targeting female returnee migrants. Tailor-made financial instruments should be developed for those interested in safe and secured investments. Relatively young returnee migrant workers may be encouraged to secure further education. The government, civil society organisations, and the private sector need to focus on the tailored services—from recognising pre-acquired skills to tailored financial products for the well-being of the returnee migrants—collectively for the community.

Returnee migrants face immense challenges to reintegrate socially—particularly those who cannot complete their migration cycle and have to return prematurely. Often, they have to clear pending debts that make them and the members of their families socially vulnerable. Unsuccessful returnee migrants tend to lose their social standings, and this may trigger mental trauma. In many instances, even successful returnee migrants are considered a burden by their families as they cease to become a source of remittances.

Migrants, upon their return, are often seen as competitors in the local job market. The female returnees suffer from disproportionate stigmatisation, and this may take a toll on their marital relationships as well. A negative narrative is often created against female migrants and their family members, not only during their time abroad, but also throughout the migration process where they have to face insults and smear. Female migrants are also subjected to insensitive behaviour and negative media coverage. Often, they become victims of domestic violence.

Failure to effectively reintegrate returnee migrants may give rise to social unrest and violence. It may also lead to returnee migrants becoming susceptible to violent extremism and irregular migration, including trafficking

and human smuggling. The countries of origin should have a reintegration framework for the forced returnee migrants and the victims of trafficking to ensure counselling, provide financial support, help secure employment, and offer remedies for the exploitation, wage theft, and recruitment fraudulence. Any reintegration strategy should include the concerns of the members of returnee migrant households, including children, the elderly and those who need special care.

Article 1 of the 1990 migrant workers' convention mentions "return" as a part of the migration process, and Article 67 concerns the operation of the countries of origin and destination to ensure an orderly return to promote adequate economic conditions for the migrants' resettlement, to facilitate durable cultural, and social reintegration in the countries of origin.

Reintegration remains one of the major challenges of migration governance in the countries of origin. However, the countries of destination cannot avoid the issue, as they have a role in preparing the migrants for their eventual return and reintegration. The migrants spend their productive years in the countries of destination, have to retire if sick or injured, and are unable to access social protection if unemployed. Therefore, the employers need to ensure the social protection of the migrants, and the countries of origin should insist that the countries of destination address those concerns.

Returnee migrants are not liabilities. They are resources who must be welcomed and cherished by the nation. Return and reintegration programmes of migrants should be incorporated in the national development plans and be approached from the much touted "the whole of government and the whole of society" perspective. The sub-national or local level government, the employers, and the private sector must be included in the reintegration programmes. An efficacious return and reintegration policy will surely help create an enabling environment for attaining the lofty targets of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals, and ensure that no one is left behind.

Dr CR Abrar is an academic and a member of Nagorik, a platform of human rights and rule of law. This article is based on the proceedings of the RMMRU-MFA-Prokas international conference on reintegration of returnee migrant workers affected by Covid-19, held virtually on April 5-6, 2021.



FILE PHOTO: STAR

Any plan to reintegrate returnee migrant workers should address specific needs of the various categories of migrants.

the livelihood needs of the returnee migrants in their places of origin was also obvious. The government's decision to allocate separate funds for reintegration initiatives through the Wage Earners' Welfare Bank was a welcome one. However, the initiative did not generate much interest among the returnee migrants. This indicated that various cohorts of those migrants had different priorities, and thus any reintegration package required catering to such diverse needs. Many migrants were subjected to wage theft in their countries of employment. A RMMRU and MFA study noted that, on an average, each Bangladeshi migrant lost USD 1,800 as outstanding payment. Any reintegration policy must include provisions under which affected migrants are able to reclaim their rightful wages and entitlements.

their migration effort and have gained skills and/or savings, (b) who were forced to return empty handed, and (c) who were in detention, or were subject to physical, sexual or mental harm before they were repatriated. Economic reintegration is the most important element for sustainable reintegration. Return has to be planned when migrants get deployed, so that they are ready for their reintegration upon return.

Securing employment upon return is a critical need of migrant workers. At the individual level, the variance between successful and unsuccessful migration, male and female migrants, and voluntarily and involuntarily returned migrants' needs should be considered while designing the reintegration programmes. Not having access to information about jobs

Towards a future full of promises and challenges



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

HOW time flies. As an old-timer, I vividly recall that wondrous day. On the glorious morning of December 16, 1971, like millions of Bangladeshis, a pre-teen kid (yours truly) waited with nervous anticipation.

Later in the day, the wonderful news reached us that the Pakistan Army in erstwhile East Pakistan had surrendered to the joint command of *Mukti Bahini* and the Indian Army. This was way before the time of the internet, social media and mobile phones. Yet, the news travelled like wildfire, and the nation erupted in joy and relief.

Freedom at last! Now a newborn nation could chart its own path in the world. But for that we paid a terrible price—millions dead, a nation in ruins. How would the country get back on its own feet?

Half a century later, it is impossible not to be impressed by the strides the nation has taken. This is especially true for us old-timers who lived through those difficult early years. Bangladesh, you have to remember, started off as a nation devastated by war with empty coffers. It had to survive a terrible man-made famine exacerbated by a Cold War-era US administration under Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger that withdrew critical grain supplies out of a fit of mean-spirited pique.

Decades of political turmoil followed, marked by bloody military coups and extended periods of autocratic rule.

Today, 50 years down the road, Bangladesh is at a crossroads again. As veteran bureaucrat-academic Akbar Ali Khan has astutely noted, the economic strides and advancement in human development indices is something

he could not have imagined when the nation won its freedom. On the other hand, the challenges that the nation faces now are also quite serious, and it can ill afford to rest on its laurels.

I shall talk about the challenges presently, but ask for the readers' indulgence for a moment as I reflect upon the breathtaking strides that Bangladesh has made. To fully realise the enormity of this achievement, I suggest we look further back to 1947, when the British ran a cartographer's knife and ripped apart Bengal to create East Pakistan.

The new province lacked even a Bangla-speaking Muslim middle class, which evolved later through the University of Dhaka. The predominantly Muslim Bengali population was largely of peasant stock, in sharp contrast to our ethnic/linguistic brethren in the neighbouring West Bengal, which had a distinguished tradition of excellence in learning that had given rise earlier to the Bengali Renaissance.

To their credit, the (predominantly Muslim) Bengalis in erstwhile East Pakistan ignored the siren call of communal, majoritarian prejudice, as over the years they fashioned a political ethos that was based on language and culture. It was an identity which was humane and inclusive in the finest traditions of the titans of Bangla literature.

The movement culminated in a liberation of a country who proudly proclaimed its guiding values defined by its national anthem by Rabindranath Tagore: *"Amar Sonar Bangla."*

Bangladesh's spectacular strides in economic development had to wait until some time after independence. A series of circumstances brought this about: the massive influx in foreign exchange remittances resulting from the growth in expatriate workers, the rise of entrepreneurship pioneered by the ready-made garment industry, and the extraordinary gusto with



It is upon us to carry on the legacy of our forefathers, who gave their lives to bring us freedom, to make this country prosperous and just.

ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

which Bangladeshis took to entrepreneurship. A nation of people, who barely two generations ago were farmers, ended up spearheading an entrepreneurial revolution that changed the country beyond recognition. Bangladesh became a leading global exporter of a slew of products, ranging from textiles to pharmaceuticals, and massive indigenous corporate houses engaged in a diverse array of activities. It's a modern-day economic miracle. However, as we take justifiable pride in

what Bangladesh has achieved, we ignore its serious challenges at our peril.

The challenges that the country faces today are also rooted in its history. One of the less salubrious developments in the recent past has been the moral bankruptcy of post-colonial elites. All over the developing world, the soaring rhetoric that accompanied the independence of former colonial nations stands in stark contrast with the sordid reality of independent nations deeply mired in

authoritarian repression, political intolerance, and rampant corruption. Bangladesh, alas, has not been able to escape this curse, which continues to cast an ominous shadow on its future.

The sobering fact remains that Bangladesh's achievements, spectacular as they are, rest on a precariously fragile framework of governance whose quality in terms of accountability and transparency leaves a lot to be desired.

There is an oft-repeated facile contention that once we achieve economic progress, it will take care of everything else. This is a dangerous myth. The underlying fault lines in governance, left unaddressed, have the potential to bring down the entire edifice tumbling down.

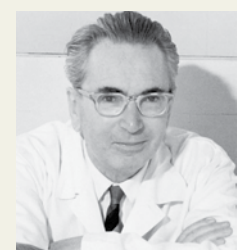
These challenges are all the more alarming given the current noxious post-globalised climate, where the rise of an intolerant majoritarianism finds easy prey in restive populations which are angered by the unconscionably uneven distribution of the spoils of economic globalisation.

At this historic juncture, we contemplate Bangladesh's future with hope and some concern. Bangladesh has taken enormous strides in the past, and there is absolutely no reason why it cannot cross the hurdles it faces today. What we have to remember, however, is that this will only happen if we recognise the challenges and make a committed effort to address them.

Today, however, I wish to take a moment, with a heart filled with poignant affection and eyes misty with tears, to thank those who made this golden future possible with their enormous sacrifice. To those valiant, departed souls who brought us our independence, I join my nation in saying, *"Amra tomader bhulbo na (We shall never forget you.)"*

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QUOTABLE Quote



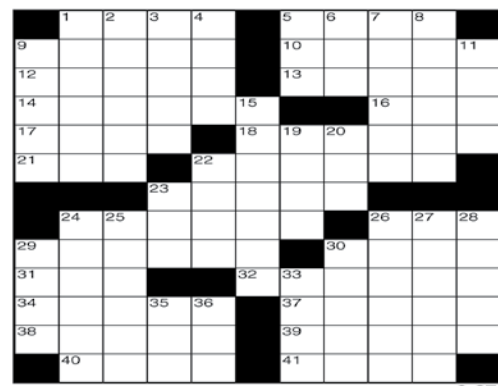
VIKTOR E FRANKL (1905-1997) Austrian neurologist

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 30 Mystique | 9 Wise ones |
| 1 Con man's con | 31 Nest item | 11 Precious |
| 5 Engrave | 32 Laptop's kin | 15 One with instant siblings |
| 9 Map area | 34 Select group | 19 Gets older |
| 10 Leafy lunch | 37 "Winnie-the-Pooh" writer | 20 Nourished |
| 12 Vine-covered shelter | 38 Bolshevik leader | 22 Frosh quarters |
| 13 Sweet liqueur | 39 Notions | 23 Scandal sheet |
| 14 Wineglass | 40 Watch over | 24 Winnie-the-Pooh's pal |
| 16 In the style of | 41 Collections | 25 Car part |
| 17 Wicked | | 26 Ammo unit |
| 18 Roof supporter | DOWN | 27 Sports settings |
| 21 Take in | 1 Tried hard | 28 Merits |
| 22 Take in | 2 Taxi driver | 29 Ship part |
| 23 Caught in a rodeo | 3 Coral island | 30 Tolerate |
| 24 Oysters' prizes | 4 Simple | 33 "Lucky Jim" author |
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| 29 Checkers demand | 6 Road sealer | 36 Finale |
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

