

**Regional Symposium on  
Deployment of Workers Overseas: A Shared Responsibility  
Provisional Programme**

**Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, Bangladesh, 15 –16 July 2008**

**Speech by Panudda Boonpala, ILO Director**

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Representative of National Coordination Committee for Workers Education, Mr. Mesbahuddin Ahmed  
Distinguished guests, resource speakers, participants, member of the press and colleagues in the Swiss  
Agency for Development and Cooperation and the ILO*

Good morning to all of you. *First of all, let me convey apologies and regrets from our Regional Director Ms. Sachiko Yamamoto. She very much wanted to be here this morning but due to health reasons, is unable to join us.*

It is a great honour for myself and the ILO Office in Bangladesh to welcome you all to this regional symposium on “Deployment of Overseas Workers – A shared responsibility. In particular, I would like to extend our appreciation to participants who have come here from 9 Asian countries and our resource persons – some have traveled here all the way from the US.

The Asia-Pacific region is a present day hub of global migration, and 29 million workers from Asia Pacific are currently employed outside their home countries. Asian migrants are approximately 26% of all the world's migrants and by all indications, this movement continues to increase. The pace of migration has accelerated in recent years, with gross outflow of migrant workers from the region exceeding 3 million workers annually. South Asia has a large share of the regional migration. More than 1.5 million South Asian workers are estimated to migrate every year, many destined for the Gulf region to work in construction, maintenance, and other service jobs. Figures of 2003-2006 show more than 200,000 workers depart every year from both Sri Lanka and Pakistan, In Bangladesh, the trends continue to rise from 188,000 in 2001 to 381,000 in 2006. In was double this number in the case of India. With a large number of irregular migrants, the actual number of migrants from each country was

even higher. In 2007, remittances to countries in South Asia were estimated by the World Bank to have exceeded US\$40 billion. Of these, India accounted for US\$27 billion, Bangladesh US\$6.4 billion, Pakistan US\$6.1 billion, Sri Lanka US\$2.7 billion, and Nepal US\$1.6 billion.

Labour migration has clearly become an important feature of Asian economies, contributing economic value to both sending and receiving countries in the region. Total foreign currency remittances to the region now are estimated at US\$105 billion in 2007, representing a three-fold increase from 2000.

In spite of the positive value of migration in the region, tremendous challenges still confront us. The first area of concern is **irregularity**. A distinct feature of Asian migrants is their lack of legal status. Around one-third of the Asian migrant workers in Asia are considered irregular, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and severely limits their avenues for services. The majority of outgoing workers in recent years, especially in the countries with the largest outflows, have been young women going into domestic work.

Another major issue confronting all our countries is **recruitment costs and fraud**. The cost of finding employment in a foreign country is excessive. Most blame this on profit margins of recruitment agents but it is also due to high transaction costs - passports, work permits, documentation. In cases where employers advance recruitment costs, there are complaints of unacceptable salary deductions: in order to pay back their recruiters, workers often go unpaid for months or years. There are many situations where workers find themselves in debt and enter indentured/slave-like labor.

It is clear that policies have failed to sufficiently **protect** the rights and interests of migrant workers and their families. Complaints among migrant workers range from poor living and working conditions to more severe exploitation, such as non-payment of wages, retention of travel documents, discrimination based on ethnicity and religion. Women and young workers are especially vulnerable to violence, sexual harassment and abuse, as well as HIV/AIDS.

South Asia and Asia as a whole face the challenge of harnessing and maximizing the economic benefits of migration and to do so, not by denying rights of migrant workers but through reinforcing the fundamental principles and rights at work. While there is much room for adapting migration policy infrastructure to emerging conditions and realities of the global labour market, there is as much room to value our shared commitment and responsibilities to decent work and fundamental human rights.

Recognising these common challenges we are facing in the region, the ILO and the Government of Bangladesh jointly organize this regional symposium. Our gathering here is an opportunity for us

discuss labour migration policies; fair recruitment practices for safe migration; exchange and share best practices on equipping workers with skills for work in foreign countries; and the protection of their rights while working abroad. It is an opportunity for countries in Asia to find concrete ways to strengthen their existing cooperation

The ILO has two Conventions for Migrant Workers: Convention No. 97 on Migration for employment; and Convention No. 143 on Migrant workers. And more recently, ILO's tri-partite constituents adopted a resolution on a fair deal for migrant workers, calling for ILO action plan on labour migration. Central to this action plan is the ILO's right based approach Multi-lateral Framework on Labour Migration.. Taking into account labour market needs, it provides guidelines and principles for policies based on best practices and international standards.

The ILO's technical cooperation and support for the Asian migration agenda requires a concerted effort, for all of us need to work closely in a comprehensive integral way. This takes various forms: in developing country "road maps" for the development of labour migration as part of a long-term development strategy, in strengthening labour inspection in economic sectors with large numbers of migrant workers, in bilateral cooperation efforts to improve recruitment and regulation practices, and region-wide information materials for migrants at most risk for trafficking and labor exploitation.

We continue to explore opportunities for working with individual countries - governments, and workers' and employers' groups and fostering cooperation between sending and destination countries. With the support of the ILO-EU Project on the Governance of Labour Migration, the ILO has been cooperating with ASEAN and research institutions in the region. We are also looking forward in joining efforts with the UN and other international development partners in achieving our goals. And we hope that, this symposium will lead to concrete follow up action at country, bilateral, sub-regional and regional level.

Finally, I wish to thank the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh for co-organizing this event. I would like to express my gratitude to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation for making this conference possible. I also acknowledge the support from the ILO/EU Asian Programme on the Governance of Labour Migration for providing technical support to this Symposium. I would like to thank all participants, all resource persons, ILO colleagues coming Geneva, Delhi, Bangkok and Dhaka Offices for their support and guidance.

Thank you