

MALAYSIA: Immigration Racket Turns Workers Into Commodities

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By Baradan Kuppusamy <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=43456> KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 6 (IPS) - Like thousands of migrant workers Mir Hussein Wahab, 29, from Lahore, Pakistan, is a victim of a new phenomenon called 'jual-beli', a local Malay term that describes a human trafficking racket that rakes in millions for international syndicates. Literally, jual-beli means 'bought-sold' and is used to refer to the daily trading of goods in the local market.

In recent months migrant workers have been persuaded to part with hard cash to enter the country only to learn that they were duped and left stranded without jobs, money or assistance from their sponsor or authorities.

"They are treated as a commodity and pay their way into the country as documented workers and then abandoned to fend for themselves," said Agile Fernandez, migrant worker coordinator with Tenaganita, a non-government organisation (NGO) that works to protect migrant workers from exploitation.

Some pay to enter the country as tourists but end up working without permits and are arrested and released after bribing officials. They may also pay to have their visas extended.

"At every turn people in the establishment -- either enforcement personnel, government officials, politicians or businessmen -- are making money out of the migrant worker," Fernandez told IPS.

"They have simply become a commodity," she said, adding that increasing number of migrant workers end up being given two meals a day to work in sweat shops across the country.

"There are more and more migrant workers turning up without jobs, without pay and destitute and left to fend for themselves in a foreign country," she said.

The arrest, last month, of Datuk Wahid Md Don, director general of the immigration department, and over a dozen of his senior officers exposed the multi-million dollar industry using foreign migrant workers as a trading commodity.

Officials from the Anti-Corruption Agency seized cash worth Malaysian Ringgit (RM) 600,000 (185, 800 US dollars) and the agency's chief Ahmad Said Hamdan admitted that the racket involved 'the public, foreigners, government officers and also syndicates' and that the problem was widespread in the country.

Malaysia, one of South-east Asia's more affluent economies, is a major importer of foreign labour in the region. Migrant workers, both legal and illegal, are estimated to form 2.6 million of the country's 10.5 million-strong workforce.

"I was traded," said Wahab, who paid RM 8,000 (2,441 dollars) to agents here and in Pakistan only to be abandoned at the Kuala Lumpur international airport.

"Neither agents nor the employers turned up," he told IPS in an interview. "We were stranded and paid our way out of the airport and now survive as illegal workers."

Wahab's group originally consisted of 29 Pakistanis, but it has since split up and the men are working in shops, factories or restaurants across the country.

"Now I only get two meals and a corner in the shop to sleep," Wahab said in passable Malay he had picked up. "I can't go home, my passport has expired and I have been arrested and released at least seven times."

The corruption exposure comes even as the government prepares to launch a massive exercise to arrest and deport an estimated 1.6 million Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers. Many of them are refugees from the violent conflict in Mindanao, Southern Philippines.

"The core problem is that Malaysia does not have a comprehensive migrant worker policy that is holistic and humanistic," said Yap Swee Seng, executive director of Suaram, a leading human rights organisation. "Current policies are reactive, ad hoc, wholly contradictory and driven by political consideration," he told IPS in an interview.

There is no single authority that oversees migrant worker issues in a holistic manner -- recruitment, placement, work, protection of rights, housing and living conditions, combating abuse and exploitation and return to homeland.

"Everything is temporary, ad hoc and confusing," Yap said. "Rampant corruption is a key reason why migrant workers end up being treated as a commodity."

"The solution is to hand over the migrant worker sector to the human resources ministry to deal with it as a human resource issue," said Fernandez. "Currently the home ministry handles it because it is seen as a security issue."

Outsourcing recruitment must be banned, say rights activists. Recruited foreign workers have to pay their fees upfront and to agents on both sides. Agents recruit more than they are allowed and simply "dump" them on the market even if no jobs are available.

Officials issue outsourcing licenses for hefty sums and the more they issue the more kickbacks they get.

Currently there are 277 outsourcing companies with ridiculously high quotas to recruit foreign workers. Licenses are usually given to politically connected people. "Imagine the sums involved if you make RM 5, 000 (1,525 dollars) per worker and you have a recruit quota of 10,000 workers," said Fernandez.

Prominent commentator and chairman of the Centre for Policy Studies Ramon Navaratnam said there is an urgent need to revamp the entire system to prevent exploitation and abuse and curb corruption. "Outsourcing companies presently get their licenses from the immigration department to recruit workers," Navaratnam told IPS. "This is unsatisfactory because it is subject to and a major source of abuse and corruption."

"We also want a reasonable wage scheme for workers. Low- income workers are currently subject to exploitation due to the poor employment conditions they undergo and are unable to afford decent living, especially with rising rates of inflation and an overall increase in the costs of living," said Navaratnam who is also president of Transparency International, Malaysia.

"There is a great deal of confusion presently about the management of foreign workers, the appointment of agents, renewal of permits and licenses and role of enforcement agencies," he said, adding the "chaotic situation" reflects poorly on the country and requires an "urgent and total" revamp of the entire system.