

The Second Regional Ministerial Conference on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, 29-30 April 2003, Bali Indonesia

Statement of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 29 April 2003

Migration in the Region

Migration in the Asia and Pacific region is dynamic and complex. The volume of migration flows in the Asia Pacific has dramatically increased over the decade in terms of numbers of migrants smuggling from the region and in terms of the numbers of migrants hosted by countries of the region. The patterns of the migration are robust and survive even conflicts and economic downturns.

If we take into account that 30-40% of total migration movement takes place through unregulated migration channels, then it is useful to take a look at migration flows in the region.

From 1995-1999 over 2 million Asian migrants workers left their countries every year. Major countries of origin include the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Annual outflow of migrant workers has more than tripled in a decade to almost 900,000 people in 2001.

Although the financial crisis in the mid-1990's resulted in a significant reduction of Asian migrants in some countries, resilience of the migration dynamic in the region is well demonstrated. The number of documented Indonesian workers in Malaysia, the number one destination for Indonesian migrants, indicates over a six-fold increase to almost 800,000 in the decades from 1990.

Migration from India shows both increases in the size and a sign of structural change. From 1985 to 1989 the annual average of 139,800 Indians left the country for migration purposes. This increased in the 1995-1998 period to more than 400,000 per year. In addition to the traditional route of migrants to the gulf region new migration flows to North America and Europe consists of skilled migrants, such as health care workers and IT technicians.

China is identified as an emerging country of origin after a relaxation of its immigration and related passport policies since the year 2000. Chinese migrants now rank as the largest nationality group of newly entering migrants in New Zealand and Canada.

While being the major region of origin for migrants, Asia is also the host region for nearly 50 million migrants, mostly concentrated in West Asia and South Central Asia. There are 20 million migrants in West Asia including 5.2 million in Saudi Arabia, 1.9 million in Jordan and 1.9 million in the United Arab Emirates. The gulf remains the major receiving region of Asian migrants although some countries have begun to see a reduction in the flow. While nearly 80% of all Thai migrants departed to the gulf in the early 80's, the figure in the late '90s indicates only 8.9%. The Philippines has had a drop from 80-40 per cent over the same period. On the contrary, the gulf region accounts for more than 90% of all Indian migrant workers for the last few decades.

Pakistan and Iran have large migrant populations with over half being refugees. In South East Asia, Malaysia and Singapore are major receiving countries and in East Asia migration to Japan continues despite the recession that has adversely affected the domestic labour market.

Irregular migration is a response to migration pressure that can not be met through regular channels. Structural dependence on undocumented migrant workers in many industries provides a strong pull for migrants.

The complexity of migration today is amplified by the exponential growth of the world population and the technological advances that facilitate trans-national travel. Consider that in 1953 the global population was around 2.5 billion and that today it stands at some 6.1 billion – and, by the year 2053 estimates are that the global population could reach 10 billion. Percentage wise this would represent a 4 fold increase in global population in a span of only 100 years. Likewise, the magnitude of migration today is greater than any other time in our history.

The paradigm shift in migration patterns, owing largely to technological advancement in global travel and communications that have made trans-national travel today the norm, rather than the exception, poses multi-fold challenges to society. Trans-national criminal elements exploit the same technology and ease of movement to ply illicit global trade in a range of areas. The social impact of trans-national crime and the criminal elements that perpetrate such crimes is well known; and, the trade in illicit drugs and false documents, the laundering money and indiscriminate acts of terrorism are all imbedded in the irregular movement of migrants.

The challenge facing governments is how to combat trans-national crime, reduce irregular migration, address issues of labour supply and demand and preserve state sovereignty, with policies and responses that, at the same time, preserve fundamental human rights and maintain the cultural, intellectual, and ethnic diversity that orderly migration promotes. In so doing, governments must guard against developing anti-migration policies as an antidote to smuggling and trafficking and related trans-national crime.

Rather, governments should endeavour to work together to employ innovative, non-discriminatory, forward looking approaches to the responsible management of migration that, on the one hand, reduces irregular/undocumented migration and, on the other, protects victims of trafficking and human smuggling – particularly women and children, and reduces the deleterious effects that transnational crime has on societies and its people. The convening of the Bali Regional Ministerial Conference on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime and the positive momentum that has been generated by the commitment made by the Ministers and the efforts of the participating governments in the areas of regional cooperation and priority setting to address these issues has been a demonstrative step forward.

The forum that the Bali Regional Conference has provided and the regional cooperation fostered through the work of the two ad-hoc experts' groups has shown that concrete progress can be achieved through identifying and implementing practical operational measures that seek to reduce the viability of trans-national criminal activity. The importance of this cooperation can not be understated.

The progress has been laudable, but as we all are aware there is a long way to go to insure that regional security is maintained and the exploitation of our citizens is significantly reduced. Governments must maintain their commitments to reduce the irregular movement of migrants and eliminate the conditions that contribute to the vulnerability of migrants through continuing efforts to strengthen national and regional capacities through the identification and sharing of best practices and bilateral, regional and international exchange and cooperation and programmes of capacity building, such as those that have been identified in the follow-up to the first Ministerial Conference.

The International Organization for Migration remains committed to meeting these objectives with your governments and looks forward to working with all of you to build upon the significant progress that has been made over the past year and in other ongoing regional and sub-regional initiatives seeking to address migration related issues.

On behalf of my Director General, Brunson McKinley, I would like to reaffirm IOM's commitment to continue to work on your behalf and the behalf of migrants to achieve our common objectives to preserve the benefits of migration and eliminate those elements that would undermine principles of state sovereignty and human rights.

Thank you.