

Regional Consultation on Media and Labor
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**Regional Consultation on
Media & Labor Migration
August 21-23, 2000
Manila, Philippines**

SUMMARY REPORT

**REGIONAL CONSULTATION
ON MEDIA AND LABOR MIGRATION
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Summary Report

Some 30 delegates from six ASEAN countries participated in the Regional Consultation on Media and Labor Migration set on August 21-23, 2000 in Manila, Philippines. The participants were media practitioners, policymakers, academics and NGO officials from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The three-day event highlighted country presentations on the state of labor migration, the extent of media coverage of labor migration concerns and the role of mass media in addressing labor migration issues in the region. Resource persons were invited to provide additional perspectives on labor migration.

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) provided assistance as AMIC's co-partner in organizing the event. The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung funded the project and supported AMIC in identifying and inviting some suitable delegates from the ASEAN region. The United Nations development Programme in Bangkok provided delegates relevant documents, in particular a magazine entitled "Understanding International Labor Migration."

Dr. Anura Goonasekera, Deputy Secretary-general of AMIC, welcomed the delegates. In his remarks, he said that given the varying significance of foreign labor across the Asian region, "it is unlikely that there can be any uniform answers or policy applications to problems of labor migration. The most effective policies are likely to be those that are custom made to address specific issues in specific areas."

He mentioned three general areas of policy concerns on migration; one, management of migration flow; two, improvement of migrant welfare in host countries and three, policies to deal when migrants finish their contracts overseas and return home.

Dr. Rudolf Traub-Marz, FES Philippine representative, also spoke during the opening ceremony and shared his initial thoughts on how media can play a positive role to ensure protection of labor migrants. They include the ff:

- a. Provide a broader and deeper coverage and discussion of the plight of labor migrants internationally and the host country.
- b. Disseminate information on the international labor standards, especially on the ILO Convention 143, and report on best practices and models of legal framework in the various sending and receiving countries.
- c. Take a strong role in the system of checks and balances to institutions to prevent illegal recruitment, exploitation of and abuses against migrants.
- d. Help strengthen the value of human rights among the citizenry.

POEA Administrator Reynaldo Regalado welcomed the delegates and cited the critical importance of media's role in addressing labor migration issues in the region. He said there is need to encourage media to cover more positive developments about overseas employment and report those who abuse and exploit migrants.

Mohd Razali Agus of the University of Malaya, Malaysia, said that the labor migration policies in his country have evolved from a liberal response to a more stringent stance on illegal workers in the last three decades of national development. The recent policies have reduced the number of illegal migrants in Malaysia, and highlighted the

contribution of labor migrants who provide the necessary manpower to spearhead Malaysia's Vision2020 in becoming an advanced nation by year 2020.

Professor Agus said that Malaysian employers still need foreign migrants, and they must provide for basic facilities and amenities.

Professor Linda Low from the National University of Singapore looked at a number of trends and issues on labor movements in East and South East Asia, and policy implications in response to globalization and the emerging knowledge-based economy (KBE) with new information communication technology partly shaped by the political economy in the region.

Her conclusions were as follows:

- a. Asia cannot simply return to its old growth model of export-led industrialization. The new KBE with ICT and globalization add up to a more dynamic, volatile and expansive set of opportunities. This may mean relying less on inexpensive foreign labor elsewhere.
- b. Asia should pay attention to its own technological transformation, nature of foreign labor flows which must move in tandem with global trends
- c. Asia must provide attention to regional technological networks founded on social trust beside technical capabilities.
- d. Asia must address social security and welfare protection for foreign workers.

Ms. Atik Nurbati of The Jakarta Post, Indonesia, said press coverage of labor migration issues in Indonesia on the surface have been extensive. This includes cases of unlucky and abused women, jailed migrants and critical reports on migration policies. A few success stories have also been highlighted, she pointed out.

Ms. Nurbati said NGOs have assisted media in covering migration concerns. She noted the lack of reporting of risks and opportunities in new countries of destination.

Ms. Supara Janchitfah of Bangkok Post, Thailand presented the problems posed by Burmese labor migration to Thailand. Among them the presence of illegal immigrants which stands at 100,000. Many of them work in the fishing industry and rubber plantations. Some are factory workers, housemaids and prostitutes. There have been cases of abuse against Burmese women.

Ms. Supara noted that many businesses that hire Burmese workers ignore their human rights.

Mr. Linam Ponnampalam of The New Paper, Singapore said adjustments could be made to improve reportage of labor migration issues in his country. These include easy access to information surrounding migration policies, more balanced reporting, employing more inventive means of capturing public imagination without having to compromise on accuracy. He said NGOs must also provide guidance in the grounding of policy formulation and assist in educational campaigns.

Ms. Eko Susi Rosdianasari of the Institute of Advocacy for Indonesian Migrant Workers, Indonesia, said an increasing number of Indonesian are moving overseas to find jobs as the economy worsens. There are close to 1.5 million Indonesian workers overseas 70% of which are women. Many of them are not protected in the countries of destination.

She called on media to encourage the government to work out better protective mechanisms for Indonesian workers in receiving countries. She also said that media should provide more space and airtime to labor migration problems.

Ms. Jackie Pollock of the Migrant Assistance Programme, Thailand, said that media reports focus mainly on the negative aspects of labor migration. One is the rise of certain diseases among laborers from Burma, Cambodia and Laos working in Thailand. Illegal immigration and its impact on the local economy have also been highlighted. Violation of their human rights hardly finds print in some newspapers.

Mr. E. Sivabalan of the Malaysian National News Agency, Malaysia, said there are about 2.21 million foreign workers in his country, many of which are employed in factories, plantation and construction sites.

Mr. Sivabalan said the Malaysian media are generally even-handed in covering migration issues. Many of the stories concerned enforcement action such as raids on workers' colonies and quarters. Alleged abuses and torture of foreign workers do find print in Malaysian media. He said there is hardly any investigative journalism on labor migration because of "the negative perception and attitude held by many Malaysians against migrants in the country." Foreign workers, referring to the semi-skilled and unskilled workers, are seen to have created a lot of serious social and economic problems for the locals, such as the rise in crime rate, and the impact on racial equation in Malaysia.

Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Quynh of the Ministry of Labor, Vietnam said the government encourages overseas employment to generate income for the increasing pool of workers in the country. He pointed out that the government has issued licenses to state-owned companies and centrally controlled organizations and unions to handle manpower export. He said that the government has initiated measures to improve the state of labor migration through training programs for government employees handling overseas employment programs, and more incentives to encourage the Vietnamese to work overseas.

Mr. Ngoc Quynh called on media to disseminate more information on overseas employment programs, and report on the living and working conditions in the countries of destination. Media should also help in the marketing of Vietnamese workers overseas, he pointed out.

Fr. Graciano Battistella of the Scalabrini Migration Center, Philippines, focused on the rights of migrants such as those contained in several of the International Labor Organization's Conventions. But many of the sending and receiving countries have not ratified these conventions, placing migrant workers in a more vulnerable situation that is open to abuse and exploitation. Protection of migrant rights largely depends on the applicable measures that each country has adopted, and in some instances does not comply with international standards, he said.

Fr. Battistella lamented the inaccuracy and superficial content of media reporting on migration issues and media's tendency to focus on problematic aspects of labor migration. He said that the possibilities for media to play a role in educating migrants, exposing abuses and furthering their rights are increasingly vast.

Mr. Rony Diaz, executive director of the Congressional Commission on Labor, Philippines, discussed policy approaches to labor migration in the country. He cited several policy programs, namely:

- a. Government must ensure the Philippines make available highly qualified workers.

- b. Government must pursue active marketing programs that will respond swiftly and with a high degree of flexibility to the changes in the labor requirements
- c. There must be effective monitoring of placements and immigrations of overseas workers.
- d. Government must formulate protective policies for vulnerable work.
- e. Government must pursue bilateral and multilateral labor agreements for labor creation and welfare promotion.

Ms. Pat Sto. Tomas, of the Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration and former POEA Administrator, Philippines, spoke of the bias against overseas employment in both sending and receiving countries in Asia. The reasons are varied, among them; overseas employment separates families and causes a breakdown in family cohesion; nationals are exposed to demeaning, dirty and dangerous jobs; workers may be exploited and abused; migrants may suffer from culture shock often due to language or cultural differences; and overseas employment subsidizes the development of other countries and represents loss of internal human capital.

She pointed out that because of overseas employment, there is now a new generation of Filipinos who are more assertive, more enlightened and more aware of the bigger world.

"It is my hope that the bias against overseas employment will somehow be mitigated by the fact that we have developed a body of literature that tells us where gaps can be narrowed and problems can be minimized," Ms. Sto Tomas pointed out.

Mr. Supat Gukum of the Ministry of Labor, Thailand, said the government has initiated programs to control illegal alien workers, which is the biggest group of migrants in the country. These included encouraging local employers to hire local workers, deportation of illegals, and information campaigns to highlight the impact of illegals on the economic, social and security concerns of Thailand.

Mr. Supat said Thai media have been supportive of government programs in mitigating the adverse effects of migration in Thailand.

Mr. Michael Tan, columnist of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and a medical doctor discussed the risks and impact of HIV contamination among Filipino overseas workers. They account for about 22 percent of all reported HIV cases in the country. He urged media to move away from sensationalism and the stigmatizing approach in covering stories of overseas workers with HIV. He said that media should write about human stories angles among overseas workers, including stories from those infected, without moralizing. He asked the government to provide advisories on HIV.

Dr. Joaquin Gonzales III, author of the book "Philippine Labour Migration, Critical Dimensions of Public Policy" and professor at the School of Professional Programs and Undergraduate Studies, Golden Gate University, USA, also spoke during the Consultation. He said that media can play advocates for migrants. He said that media in the US have highlighted discrimination against Asian overseas workers based on gender and educational background.

On the third day of the meeting, the participants discussed and generated a list of recommendations on how media can play a more pro-active role in addressing labor migration issues, and how governments, NGOs, academe and other relevant entities assist media in raising the level of public awareness, understanding and participation in labor migration (see attached).

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**DAY ONE
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