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MEDIA REPORTING ON LABOUR MIGRATION:
MORE OR LESS
THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

By

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For

REGIONAL CONSULTATION ON MEDIA AND LABOUR MIGRATION

Organised by

ASIAN MEDIA INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION CENTRE (AMIC)
21-23 August 2000
Manila, Philippines
Introduction

If the pen is mightier than the sword, then surely man has found a powerful ally in journalism to carry that might further. Winston Churchill certainly used the pen more than the sword, with much success. Journalism is indeed a powerful tool. It employs various print and broadcast media to inform, to entertain, to persuade and to fashion people's attitudes and actions.

In the larger context, it can nurture or break a nation. Journalism is the corridor for the layman to communicate with kings and leaders alike, and vice versa. Finding a story and writing is not the end of the road. Because the story touches everyone, the journalist is placed with the burden of presenting the news item as unbiased, truthful and accurate as possible without personal values and beliefs clouding the issue.

"The Malaysian Adventure"

Malaysia is home to hundreds of thousands of foreigners, legal or otherwise who come in search of a better living. In fact, the country has a very long history and a very large proportion of migrants that one could say that Malaysia, like the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Singapore, was built partly on migrant power. Today, more than 40 percent of the Malaysian population of 22 million people are descendants of migrants, mainly from China and India.

If one were to look around Malaysia today, one can see that it is the immigrants, whether legal or illegal, who provide the bulk of the labour sorely needed in the country's construction industry. In the same vein, thousands of them are keeping the country's factories humming. The Minister of International Trade and Industry, Rafidah Aziz, was reported to have told a conference that she was rather taken aback when she found burly and hairy Bangladeshi men sewing and packing lingerie, bras and panty hose of a popular brand during a visit to the factory!

The Malaysian government differentiates between two types of alien workers - the skilled professional group such as the expatriates, and the semi-skilled or unskilled group. For the purpose of this paper, I shall confine my discussion to the second category.
In view of the large number of illegal population of immigrants in Malaysia, it is impossible to determine the exact number of foreigners in the country. In 1998, foreigners were said to form about 10 per cent of Malaysia's population of about 22 million and about 27 per cent of the country's labour force of about eight million. The majority of them belong to the semi-skilled and unskilled category. The bulk of the migrant workers in Malaysia come from Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines.

Indonesians account for more than a million of the migrant population in Malaysia, the region's largest employer of migrant labour. Malaysians themselves leave home for Singapore, Taiwan and Japan. While accurate numbers are not available, perhaps as many as 100,000 Malaysians work in Singapore, primarily in the manufacturing, construction and retailing

Based on official estimates, out of 2.21 million foreign workers in Malaysia, about half a million are in Sabah, mainly Filipinos.

As of April 1999, there were 713,821 registered foreign workers in Malaysia, down from 1,033,497 in 1998. The majority of foreign workers, more than 503,000 are employed in factories, plantations and construction sites. A large number are working as domestic helpers.

Strict regulations imposed on foreign workers by the Malaysian government and the economic slowdown after the region's financial crisis did not discourage foreign workers, especially from Indonesia and Bangladesh to secure jobs. In spite of increased levy and other problems, wages provided to Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia seem to be lucrative in comparison to wages in other middle-eastern countries.

On Aug 14, a Malay Language daily Berita Harian carried a special report that thousands of Indonesians from all over the archipelago are gathering at Pulau Bintan just south of Singapore, waiting for a chance to slip into Malaysia. The paper said some 18,000 of these immigrants managed to enter Malaysia a week and it seemed that there are syndicates which arranged for these people to undertake the perilous sea journey to the Malaysian shore.

No doubt, these go to show just how porous the Malaysian coasts are, and how inadequate are the enforcement agencies.
The Story Teller

Stories about labour migration seldom makes it to the front page of newspapers in Malaysia, let alone a lead story, unless they involve cases of tragedies, abuse and mistreatment of migrants.

One could say that the Malaysian media are very even handed when it comes to reporting on immigrant issues. The Berita Harian story on Aug 14 did not come as a surprise to many Malaysians because the place is well known as a transit point.

On any other day, one could find stories about the immigrants but they are the usual staple, like being caught and deported, fights among themselves, robberies and other crime. Once in a while, there could be a police bust of a syndicate bringing in the illegal workers.

There are also reports of the illegal immigrants building their own settlement on government land around Kuala Lumpur, and the authorities would act to tear down these squatter houses but they would sprout up again somewhere else. One particular settlement on the western fringe of Kuala Lumpur is indeed well known to Malaysians as the “Chilli Wong” of Jakarta, because of the garbage and pollution caused by the squatters. Questions were raised as to how this settlement could have water and power supply.

In downtown Kuala Lumpur, the famous Batu Road where Malaysians used to go for shopping, is becoming a street somewhere in Jakarta because of the numerous Indonesian traders and hawkers. Residents of Kuala Lumpur usually avoid the area because of the large presence of these Indonesian immigrants.

Official Action

Since the 1970s, the media have been roped in by the Malaysian government through the various agencies and the National Security Council to help in stamping the influx of illegal immigrant.

Throughout the 1970s, no action was taken to address the issue of labour shortage and the infiltration of illegal aliens. It was only when the number of illegals became large and noticeable and their presence began to cause problems for the local population, especially in the urban areas, that steps
were taken to address the problem. In spite of the measures taken, aliens continued to enter the country clandestinely. In January 1989, amidst protests from some members of the public, trade union leaders, politicians and the media against the increasing number of illegal workers, the Malaysian government sent directives to employers in the plantation sector to register their illegal workers in a move to monitor and control the aliens in the country.

In 1991, the Malaysian government with the help of the media instituted a multi-faceted five-point program to deal with the problem which included legalizing large numbers of workers and a crackdown on unregistered illegals. In January 1994, when it became clear that existing policies had failed to stop illegal immigration, the legal recruitment of unskilled and semi-skilled foreign workers from outside the country was again stopped. After complaints from employers whose need for foreign workers had been certified but who were not allowed to bring in workers, the government lifted the ban on skilled workers for the manufacturing sector but continued to subject employers to the legal application process.

**Media Coverage on Labour Migration Issues in Malaysia**

As mentioned earlier, the Malaysian media are generally even-handed in their coverage on the migrants.

A survey of 63 issues of Malaysian newspapers selected over one year from September 1997 by a team of Malaysian journalists revealed that stories about immigrant labour held a fair bit of the Malaysian media's attention, occasionally even making it as the page one lead story.

The New Straits Times had an average of 1.2 stories on the topic per issue. Out of the 63 issues scanned, 39.7 per cent had no stories on migrant labour, 20.6 per cent had one story, 23.8 per cent had two stories, and 15.9 per cent had three or more stories.

In the Star newspaper, 38.0 per cent of the issues had no stories on the topic, 41.3 per cent had one story, 12.7 per cent had two stories and 7.9 per cent had three or more stories on immigrant workers.

The Malay language newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, had an average of one story per issue. In the survey period, 38.0 per cent of the daily had no story, 31.7 per cent had one story each, 25.4 per cent had two stories and 4.8 per cent had three or more stories.
For the Chinese language newspapers, Sin Chew Jit Poh, had 103 stories in the survey period, making an average of 1.6 stories per issue. Of the 63 issues, 30.2 per cent had no story, 28.6 per cent had one story, 17.5 per cent had two stories and 23.8 per cent had three or more stories.

A major part of the stories concerned the enforcement action such as raids on workers' colonies and quarters. The authorities will always make it a point to invite journalists to accompany them during raids to flush out illegal workers. Deportation of illegal workers in the hundreds and thousands also made the news.

Most, if not all the reports about migrant workers in the newspapers were hard news items. At times, it will come in the form of news analysis, special reports, features, etc. They make good copies when they involve serious issues such as cases of alleged abuse and torture of the alien workers, particularly the maids.

One example is the case of Ms. Irene Fernandez. Ms. Fernandez who is the director of Tenaganita (an NGO) is currently facing a charge under Malaysia's Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 for publishing "with malicious intent" a memorandum on the alleged abuse of migrants entitled "Abuse, Torture and Dehumanised Treatment of Migrant Workers at Detention Camps". Her case caught the attention of the local and foreign media.

Then, there is the case of Kusiah Manijan, an Indonesian who came to Malaysia, leaving her husband and two children in Kendal, Central Java, in search of a job. Kusiah ended up working as a maid. But at the end, she became the victim of her 44-year-old woman employer who not only ill-treated her but also inflicted serious injuries on her. Kusiah has since returned home while the employer was charged in court.

There may be many more foreign workers with similar fate as Kusiah. Only cases that were brought to the attention of the authorities have been reported in the local newspapers. When Kusiah's case was splashed in the newspapers, more and more cases of abuse involving foreign workers, especially those working as maids, surfaced. Many cases of abuse go unreported in the media because the women (maids) themselves are rarely willing to complain to the authorities, even in cases of severe physical abuse. If they were illegal migrants, they would not want to reveal themselves for fear of deportation.
The usual stories that can be found in Malaysian newspapers about migrant workers were cases of employers withholding wages, unreasonable working conditions and in the case of Indonesian women, having to handle pork when working in Chinese restaurants or for Chinese employers. Being a Muslim nation, such stories make headlines in the Malay language papers while it may just be fillers in the English language newspapers.

There has not been much investigative journalism in this field (labour migration). This is because of the negative perception and attitude held by many Malaysians about the migrants, particularly those who enter the country illegally. Their presence has posed serious social and economic problems for the locals. Crime rates have increased. The most common crime of which immigrants were in the news was illegal entry. Other offences that made it in the newspapers were possession of counterfeit documents, rioting, child abuse, kidnap, bribery, burglary, murder and operating illegal businesses. Although the number of criminal activities are rife among the immigrants, newspapers seldom publish the figures, as access to such information is almost zero.

There are also other social problems caused by the immigrants that have not escaped the journalist's eyes and ears. For example, intermarriages especially between Bangladesh nationals and local Indian women have also caused uproar in the Indian community. The media tend to play up these issues, citing cases where Bangladesh men get married to local women and later abandoning them. In Sabah, the rise in the number of offspring of immigrants has been a major concern.

Then there is the question of concern among many non-Muslims in Malaysia, particularly the Chinese, over the influx of both legal and illegal Indonesians. Chinese-based political parties have expressed concern, although not openly, about the increasing number of Indonesians entering the country and eventually settling down in Malaysia after marrying locals. The Chinese fear that the presence of the Indonesians could alter substantially the racial equation in the country.

Normally, news reporting about labour migration in Malaysia and I believe in other countries too, tends to be one sided, in favour of the locals and not the migrants. There has been a tendency on the part of the local newspapers to bring to the attention of their readers the effects or problems caused by the migrants. The negative images of the immigrants have been a favorite theme of most local newspapers. For example, aliens have been described as health risks and also as causes of increasing social
problems. Illegal entry of immigrants creates an opportunity for people with contagious diseases to enter Malaysia. Many aliens are identified as suffering from whooping cough, neonatal tetanus, malaria, hepatitis A and B and sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis. This was reported by two local dailies -- The Malay Mail and The Star in their 1992 October issues.

There have also been cases where newspapers run stories on foreign workers seeking treatment in government hospitals at the expense of locals, although the foreigners are entitled for the same treatment almost for free.

Another major concern is the administration of medical check-ups for immigrant workers. Insurance for workers also earned a mention in most newspapers. The increasing social problems, especially in the urban areas have also been attributed to the aliens. Stories of increase in begging, prostitution, deviant religious teachings have been associated with the immigrants.

The media have also highlighted the threat to security posed by the aliens. Although there is a lot of resentment and antagonism against aliens by Malaysians whose lives are negatively affected by their presence and employment, local media normally do not play up these issues. This is because the are laws against such move of which I will discuss later in this paper.

There have been times when newspapers received letters from readers expressing their concern over the influx of illegal immigrants. A case of point is in Sabah highlighted by the local Daily Express newspaper. It quoted "a concerned veteran" as saying and I quote:

"It seems there is no end to reports of foreigners in Sabah causing a lot of problems, threatening not only the safety of the local people but also to Malaysia's sovereignty. The pertinent question is why are we to lenient about their ever-increasing numbers and giving them better treatment then even Malaysian citizens."

"We should be even strict in enforcing the law especially when a rebel group (referring to the Abu Sayyaf) from a foreign country has the audacity to encroach into our territory to kidnap nine Malaysians and 12 foreign tourists right under the very noses of our security forces."
The writer went on to say: “The illegal immigrants even get to travel to the exit points from Kota Kinabalu in comfort. Special air-conditioned coaches are used to transport them to Sandakan and Tawau in Sabah. The foreigners also swamp the hospitals, schools and clinics where the locals are treated as just one of the crowd.”

However, it's not negative news all the way. There have been positive stories about the immigrants such as the participation of foreign workers in local festivals, and the case of humanitarian aid for stricken foreign workers.

Of late, concerns involving intermarriages, social assimilation, illegal settlements, among others, have largely faded from the local media. News should be a fresh commodity and as such, the media will have to keep up with the latest development. Much of the news is also direct reporting of what government leaders say on the issue and that is what the readers get.

Sources of Information

Government policy and official measures on immigrant labour are a natural source of news items. Government spokesman such as the Police and Immigration authorities are another main source of news on the issue. Migrant workers themselves are also additional sources of information but not the staple. In the absence of investigative and analytical reporting, the reader has to draw tentative inferences on trends and events that are shaping his or her environment.

Problems Associated with Media Coverage

One of the problems faced by journalists in reporting about labour migration is the lack of information and research. Research on alien labour in Malaysia is often difficult and dangerous as it involved the illegals and the various syndicates that protects them. Data on the subject are also acutely lacking, as the relevant authorities such as the Immigration Department, the Police and the Task Force on Foreign Labour is usually quite reluctant to release them.

To date there are only a handful of researches focusing on the subject with research grants from local universities, the government and foreign funding agencies. These grants are small, allowing for small-scale studies only.
Studies on alien labour in Malaysia began only in the early 1980s after the problems associated with alien labour began to attract the attention of the public and media. Today, there have been attempts at the national level to undertake a comprehensive study and documentation of all aliens in the country. Studies have centered on legal and illegal workers of all nationalities in the various job sectors and address several issues among them, the exploitation and abuses of alien workers, social problems among the aliens, involvement of aliens in criminal activities, etc. However, much is yet to be done.

English Language papers presented stories on labour migration more often than Malay, Chinese and Tamil newspapers. There is also a tendency among journalists to depend largely on reports of conferences and seminars as well as government actions or policy initiatives when reporting on labour issues. There is a lack in initiative on the part of the journalists. Most of the stories or articles presented are usually taken from press releases either from the government or the NGOs. Another obstacle is the limited space in printed media, as labour issues have to compete with other issues such as politics, crime, economics, etc. Labour stories will make front page only during Labour Day or when there is a major strike by workers.

As I have said earlier in my paper that journalism is indeed a powerful tool. But the greater the power, the greater the responsibility.

Journalists in Malaysia have been constantly reminded that freedom of the press does not mean freedom to do or write anything. In the words of the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and I quote "press freedom must have its limits" and that "unlimited freedom...is difficult as it will give rise to problems which will affect everyone." He went on to say "While we need more freedom, an increased sense of responsibility is also vital".

Restrictions have been imposed on newspapers in Malaysia through various Acts of Parliament namely the Printing Presses and Publications Act (of which Ms. Fernandez was charged under), the Sedition Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Internal Security Act. The authorities say these laws are needed to ensure a responsible media in view of the multi-racial and multi-religious make-up of Malaysia.
Recommended Strategies: 
Improving Coverage of Labour Migration

A. Ensuring optimal impact of coverage on labour migration.

Working with the mainstream media presents both opportunities and challenges. There are limitations associated with the mainstream media outlets. It is important for the government officials and the NGOs to be aware of the needs of their local and regional media. There is also a need for labour issues to be presented realistically, rather than sensationaly. The media has a responsibility to help create public awareness, public interest and public participation. The media can also put pressure on the government for more or additional high-level policies related to labour issues and labour migration.

1. There is an urgent need to create an open forum for the exchange of information on issues relating to migrant labour and encourage higher quality reporting on the issues by the media. Stories must be more in-depth, analytical, and give the total picture rather than merely record the rhetoric's at seminars and press conferences. Statistics on the number of workers, type of jobs, etc. should be included in a news report. The use of visuals is very important in projecting the problems posed by the migrants and also their sufferings. In this regard, the electronic media especially television has a great role to play because it reaches a large audience. Showing regular documentaries on the problems faced by the migrants, interviews with them, highlighting the impact of labour migration on our country can be very effective in making people aware of the extent of the problem.

2. Media workers would have to be continually educated on the issue. Ignorance hampers coverage of stories. Materials lacking in solid information would fail to positively influence policy change and the public. It is also important that media do not get tired of the issue.

3. Media must consciously allot more space to features and investigative pieces on labour migration. Stories must emphasise policy changes. Journalists must extensively interview officials on what they exactly intend to do to be able to solve problems confronting labour migration and get a commitment from them. A corner for commentaries on labour issues particularly involving foreign workers and the problems posed or experienced by them can be opened to encourage public discussion on the issue(s).
4. There must be a media network group that would help handle dissemination of information on labour migration and labour issues.

5. Stories on child labour could take the perspective that it has become regional issue that transcends borders and may require cooperation among governments.

6. NGOs can also assist to get information out on labour migration. They could write letters to the editor's column. Here you get to control the content of the piece. These are more likely to be published when pegged to current news events or when framed in response to previous articles.

7. Developing contacts with local journalists is also very important. You could build a track record by keeping constant contact with the media. The track record you build through repeated contacts with the media can be especially productive if you identify key and hopefully sympathetic journalists to speak with personally. When you send a press release, it will not hurt to call the media or journalists concerned to confirm that they have received the press release.

8. The NGOs could also serve as experts who are available to journalists for comment whenever there is an urgent issue. The journalists must have easy access to you or your organisation. If the journalists' initial contact with you is successful, you may well be tapped on a regular basis for comments on labour-related issues.

9. Another avenue would be for the NGOs to help unions with their media work.

B. Improvement of Resources

1. Establish a network for the exchange of information. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) could open a website on labour migration and regularly update information in it for the media.

2. The ILO should sponsor more training sessions for journalists to assist them get a good handle of the issue. The seminars can be regional, subregional or in each country. Media organisations should initiate in-house training by organising for their journalist orientation seminars.

3. The ILO could work with media outfits in doing research work in countries where date on labour migration is lacking.
4. NGOs should continue to give media a perspective of their work, the difficulties they face in helping foreign workers.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that foreign labour has met Malaysia’s immediate and medium-term requirement in the country’s rush towards industrialization.

The problems and issues posed by the presence of this increasing number of aliens are bound to get more complex and more difficult to resolve in the long term. For, Malaysia must one-day shift from labour-intensive to high tech industries and this must give rise to the question of what to do with these workers.

While the workers who entered the country through legal means can be sent home after their contracts expire, what about the fate of the hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants in the country?

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

DAY TWO
22 August 2000