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Paper No. 13
Migrant Workers in Indonesia and Media Coverage
Maria Hartiningsih

There is no need to debate the extent of protection for Indonesian migrant workers. The execution in Saudi Arabia last June, of Warni, a migrant worker from Malang, East Java, that was only known a month later is proof of how the government (especially the Ministry of Manpower and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the private sector (manpower recruitment agencies) view migrant workers.

Warni is just one example. Kartini's case was also just known after she was nine months in jail in Fujairah, Union of Arab Emirates. Kartini was eventually saved from a stoning penalty, as was Nasiroh, who escaped death after three years and eight months in a jail in Qassem, Saudi Arabia.

But that was not the case with other migrant workers who suffered physical, psychological and sexual abuse since the massive sending of low-skilled migrant workers to Saudi Arabia began in the early 1980s.

At a time when the government could not provide enough jobs to fight unemployment, and as development tend to displace an increasing number of people, working overseas as menial workers became a shining hope for many.

With a disorderly departure procedure -- with brokers everywhere, from motorcycle cab drivers to village chiefs, even officials - this sector began to draw the government's attention since it is a US$ 2.6 billion money making machine - US$ 1 billion of it coming from migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia.

Migrant workers were then reduced to figures and foreign exchange earners. Their suffering was never considered. Efforts on protection only reached a level of empty promises.

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Currently there are three more Indonesian migrant workers awaiting similar punishment in Saudi Arabia. Data from the Women's Solidarity Union (WSU, Perserikatan Solidaritas Perempuan), an NGO specializing in advocacy for migrant workers, showed that the number of female migrant workers suffering violence in Saudi Arabia in 1998 - 1999 increased by more than 100 percent, i.e. from 227 to 484 cases.

The Indonesian Embassy in Saudi Arabia on average handles 2,500 cases a year. In the period of 1994 - 1997, the number of cases were 11,817 persons. Reported
cases of rape kept increasing, from 59 cases in 1995, 363 cases in 1996 and 507 cases in 1997. Currently there are around 400 persons staying at the Indonesian Embassy, escaping violence from their masters.

The lack of funds and special officers to handle the various cases in countries where Indonesian migrant workers abound were often cited as reasons of lack of protection. However, implicitly there seems to be an avoidance of responsibility because of the difficulty in coordination among departments.

It is understandable then, that reports on serious cases, -- such as unpaid workers, abuse, unclear death, threats of executions aside of rape, unwanted pregnancy etc. - were only known through local news.

The Indonesian Worker Recruitment Services Association (APJATI in its Indonesia acronym) tends to be merely reactive. Cases disclosed by the press were regarded as slander, not viewed as constructive input. Therefore, they tend to deny the facts or even unquestionable proof, such as arbitrary treatment in temporary quarters in Indonesia.

"Most of those involved in this business are male, so they do not have empathy on the experiences and sufferings of the women that accounts for more than 70 percent of migrant workers. Most of them work in domestic sectors," said Dr. Musdah Mulia, an expert team member of the Minister of Manpower, also an expert at the State Ministry of Human Rights.

Manpower Minister Bomer Pasaribu knew that a number of manpower agents forged migrant workers' identities and the Indonesian Embassy's stamps. Unfortunately he seems to dismiss the suggestion to temporarily ban the sending of migrant workers to Saudi Arabia, -- initially suggested by the State Minister of Women's Empowerment. Khofifah Indar Parawansa, supported by Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab and First Lady Mrs. Sinta Nuriah - for 100 days beginning on August 17, 2000.

The minister was also aware of indications of organized crime practices in the trade of migrant workers. They deceive, enslave, and trade migrant workers with the disguise of manpower recruitment, although APJATI protested the use of the term "human trade" for their business.

However, he did nothing. There are no sanctions against the agencies that clearly violate the law. If their rotten operations were disclosed, they gave out thick envelopes stuffed with banknotes to the authorities and the cases just vanished into thin air.

The hundred day moratorium on the sending of female migrant workers to Saudi
Arabia may be used to evaluate and consolidate the entire system of protection for Indonesian migrant workers prior and after departure, at the time of work and after they return to Indonesia.

The problem is crooks are everywhere and they are ready to pounce on the migrant workers. Who said that the Soekarno - Hatta airport in Jakarta is safe? There are a lot of hold-ups, muggings and even sexual harassment happening to migrant workers arriving at the airport.

Therefore, major change attempts must be an overall effort. From eliminating the middleman system prior to departure, a transparent departure mechanism, correct and responsible training, including knowledge on the socio-cultural situation in the target country, the protection system in the working place, and the importance of having a bank account, helping in managing a business using the migrant workers' income and migrant workers and their family's protection against various types of exploitation and violence.

Temporary ban on the sending of migrant workers may also be regarded as an interval to ensure that migrant workers protection would not be upstaged by other political agendas. This is the more so as the Migrant Workers Protection Law, the ratification of the international convention on migrant workers, and the bilateral agreement with the entire recipient countries has not been finalized.

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These are the major problems faced by Indonesian migrant workers - especially female migrant workers that makes 70 percent of the total. This is also the main subject of the mass media's coverage on migrant workers.

However, coverage of the problem could not only stop at the headlines, especially cases of violence that occur to would-be migrant workers overseas and in the boarding houses prior to sending them. Investigation must also be done to cover fraud cases leaving the migrants adrift and being passed around from one agency to another, just like in slave trading.

This is not an easy problem concerning the sensitivity of the case. For the record, APJATT frequently wrote to Kompas editors, every time an investigation touched this tragic subject. Currently, the recruiters agencies bargaining position is strong, since efforts to temporarily stop migrant workers from going to Saudi Arabia is still hitting the rocks.

Another crucial matter in which the coverage must be done by investigation is to disclose the process behind the sending of the migrant workers, in order to discover who are the players and the backers of this human trade. Other topics to cover are the economic and socio-political background behind the policy of sending
workers overseas, legal matters and other such topics that are still not yet transparent in Indonesia.

Other matters are regular coverage on the development of the situation. These matters could be found in press conferences, from NGOs, and also from on-the-spot research. But the main approach is to investigate on the ground because statistics seldom describe the problem clearly.

So far, Kompas' coverage appropriately considers gender perspective and always side with the disadvantaged, i.e. low-income class females from rural areas. Due to difficult times, they have no other choice but to become migrant workers overseas whatever the risk. This preference is a conscious choice, considering the fact that money gained from work overseas does not necessarily increase the bargaining position of women in the villages.

In many cases, the woman's position became worse. When they return home, there is a probability that their money is used up, as their family could not manage the money well, their children are abandoned, and the husband re-married.***

*) Journalist at Kompas daily in Jakarta, Indonesia. This paper is presented at the regional consultation on "Media and Labour Migration," August 21 - 23, 2000 in Manila.