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Regional Consultation on Media and labour migration –
August 21-23, 2000, Manila

Welcome Remarks by Anura Goonasekera.
Deputy Secretary-General, AMIC

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, Welcome to our three-day regional consultation on Media and Labour Migration. As most of you are by now aware this consultation is organized by the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre with assistance from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration. We are very much thankful to both these organizations for their invaluable support. May I add that AMIC has had a long association with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - going back to 30 years. FES played a key role in setting up AMIC in 1971. It provided core funding for the running of AMIC till end of 1999. At present FES supports AMIC on individual projects. We are proud of our close associations with this important institution.

The theme of this consultation – Media and labour migration – is significant to us in many ways. For most of us living in Asia labour migration is part of our everyday experience. Some of us are migrants ourselves. We have left our home countries in search of better employment and newer experiences. In some countries the majority of the population are descendents of relatively recent migrants.

The movement of peoples across national frontiers is not new in Asia. Migration is an integral part of the development of Asian societies and nations. It has brought about a mixing of cultures throughout Asia's long history. Labor migration, as a more specific
form of population movement, also has a long history. The capture of the able-bodied foreigners for forced labour was not an uncommon practice among some Asian societies. The emotive motifs such as in the bas-reliefs at Angkor vat, in Vietnam, bear silent testimony to the existence of forced labor migration in Southeast Asian societies in ancient times. Historical records in many Asian countries report of significant migration of people to and from different Asian countries.

Coming to more recent times, contract labor movements from Asian countries in the '70ies and early '80ies, were mostly to the oil-rich countries of the Middle East. However, from the late 1980s there was a shift towards countries within Asia itself, particularly towards those countries that had exhibited rapid and sustained economic growth - Japan and the "new" economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand. In 1998 the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that there were probably some 2.5 million foreign workers in Malaysia, including 1 million who are undocumented, some 1.26 million in Thailand, 1.35 million in Japan and 450,000 in tiny Singapore. However, with the notable exception of Singapore, foreign workers represent a very small fraction of the population of these countries.

What should we do in this situation? The agenda of this conference gives a number of important themes that the delegates will discuss during the coming three days. You will no doubt discuss pressing problems and examine solutions based on policies in the area of labour migration.

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 labour migration. The most effective policies are likely to be those that are custom made to address specific issues in specific areas. These will vary by level of economic development of the country and historical factors such as whether it is primarily a sending or a receiving country.

I will mention briefly three general areas of policy concern.

First: policies intended to manage migrant flows. This will require proper systems of documentation of foreign migrants. Such documentation will be in the interests both of governments and of the migrants themselves. It would minimize the chances of violation of immigration laws that is of concern to all governments in the region. It would also remove the constant fear of deportation and random arrest among migrant workers.

It is necessary to improve bilateral communication between countries in order to facilitate cross-border collaboration and to reduce the incidence of unauthorized migration.

The most effective policies to manage migration are likely to be government-to-government agreements. However it may also be necessary to explore multilateral paths. These could be through the offices of United Nations agencies such as the ILO or through regional organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The dependence upon foreign labor is not likely to be reduced significantly in the near
future. As such governments should consider enforcement through more effective legislation. I believe that such legislation should target the employers of foreign labor rather than impose bureaucratic checks and controls on the migrants themselves. This is the "user will pay" principle.

More freedom for foreign laborers and foreign trainees to change jobs or status within their sector of allocation will also be helpful. Such a policy will discourage workers from going underground if retrenched.

Second area of intervention is in policies to improve migrant welfare in host countries. Governments in the region need to become state parties to existing international conventions relating to the protection of migrant rights. Governments should implement appropriate policies with the necessary political will. Of particular importance is the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. This agreement needs the ratification of twenty countries in order to become legally binding.

Effective channels of communication are required to provide information to migrants regarding their rights within the host society. Information on the rules, regulations and procedures relating to migrant workers should be easily available to potential employers and to the migrants themselves. Non-governmental organizations may provide useful networks for such activities. Furthermore governments and non-governmental organizations should explore the possibilities of establishing networks of job placement agencies in order to facilitate the incorporation of foreign labor into the host country's labor force and for social integration in the host country.
The system of recruitment is a critical policy area that is important for the welfare of migrants. The deregulation of procedures of sending workers overseas may give migrants more choice and make the process more transparent. However more important would be the effective monitoring of existing programmes in order to prevent abuse, excessive fees and unscrupulous practices. We should pay particular attention to vulnerable groups, such as women, or to those who fall within gray areas in worker legislation, such as trainees. In many places women tend to be treated unequally with regard to pay and conditions of work.

Finally governments should look much more closely at what happens to the migrants after they finish their time overseas and return home. Return is a normal part of any international labor migration system. There should be policies to help migrants to reintegrate into the economies and societies of origin.

Migrant labour is a complex international transaction. It raises economic issues as well as questions about the meaning of labour, citizenship and civil rights. The rights of migrant workers can no longer be ignored. It is wrong to deny them freedom of association and the right to organize and bargain collectively just because they are migrant workers without any political power. Migrant workers must have legal channels to voice their grievances and represent their interests. Policy makers should pay heed to the human face of labor migration. It is instructive to remember the Swiss play-write Max Frisch's comments about guest workers in Europe. "We asked for workers and we got human beings".

1 International Migration: a global challenge visit http://www.prb.org/pubs/bulletin/bu51-1/pat2.htm
Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your attention. I wish your deliberations every success.

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