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from the RINGSIDE

Multiple challenges of global migration

New York: Four days ago, the report of the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) entitled “Migration in an interconnected world: New directions for action” was presented to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. This Commission, of which I am a member, was constituted in 2003 as an independent body to “analyse the gaps in current policy approaches to migration; and make recommendations to the Secretary General and others”. Over the last two years, the Commission held five regional hearings in the Asia Pacific, the Mediterranean, Middle East, Europe, Africa, the Americas, and considered the views of a wide cross-section of society — government, trade unions, migrant organisations, academia, corporate management and civil society.

Migration is an inevitable facet of globalisation. As new technologies enable a seamless transfer of capital, goods, services, information and knowledge, a freer movement of people is now a historical reality. Consider the following facts:

- There are over 200 million international migrants in 2005, a number which has increased rapidly from 82 million in 1972 and 125 million in 2000.
- Almost half of the world’s international migrants are women and there are more female than male migrants in Asia, the Caribbean and Europe.
- There are 66 million migrants in Europe accounting for 8% of Europe’s population, 50 million in Asia and just 40 million in North America. The USA is the host country for 35 million constituting 20% of the world’s migrants followed by Russia with just over 13 million.
- Among the countries of origin, the Chinese diaspora has over 35 million people followed by India with 20 million and Philippines with 7 million.
- Interestingly while 60% of the world’s migrants live in developed countries a sizeable 40% reside in the developing countries.

The factors which have contributed to a dramatic increase in migration include:

FIRST, demographic differential. Many of the more prosperous nations have a fertility ratio significantly below the replacement rate of 2.1% per woman. Their population is becoming smaller and older, a scenario which threatens their ability to sustain current levels of economic growth, pension and social security system. According to the UN Population Division, the estimated fertility rates for the period 2000-05 range from 1.4 in Europe, 2.5 in Latin America and a high of 5.4 in Sub-Saharan Africa. The World Bank estimates that the global labour force in the period 2000-10 will have an annual increase of 40 million per year; 38 million will come from developing countries and only 2 million from high-income countries.

SECOND, wage disparities. 45.7% of people earn less than \$1 per day in Sub-Saharan Africa, 14.4% in South Asia and 10% in Latin America.

THIRD, unemployment rates, which is at 7.22% in Middle East and North Africa, 11% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 6.5% in the industrialised countries.

FOURTH, educational differentials. Only 58% women and 68% men are literate in low income countries with almost 100% literacy in the advanced countries.

FINALLY, democracy and quality of governance. The Commission has concluded that “by migrating, people who are living in disturbed economic and political circumstances are able to insure themselves and their families against market uncertainties, political crises, armed conflicts and other risks”.

The issue of migrants’ contribution to host countries is beginning to secure recognition. They are making a significant contribution in mitigating labour shortages, and maintaining production at competitive costs obviating the need for outsourcing. Their supply chain now extends from mechanical functions to high value added activity, sustaining the knowledge economy in innovation driven societies.

The remittances that the migrants send home has become increasingly significant with formal transfers in 2004 exceeding \$150 billion with an estimated \$300 billion additional transfers sent informally. This is multiple of Official Development Assistance and second only to Foreign Direct Investment. However 60% of the remittances are sent to developing countries with Mexico receiving 16 billion per year followed by India at around 11 billion and Philippines at 8.5 billion.

While the developmental impact of remittance is obvious there are other contentious issues on migration particularly irregular migration, refugees and asylum seekers. An estimated 2.5 to 4 million migrants cross the international borders without authorisation each year and at least 5 million of Europe’s 56 million migrants are irregular while the number in the US is double at around 10 million. India has over 20 million migrants with irregular status while 50% of the Mexican born population in the US in 2000 had an irregular status.

There is no doubt that migration will continue to rise rapidly in the decades ahead. The multi-faceted challenge which this creates needs a coherent international response.

How should the world respond to a freer interchange of people? How can the mutuality of benefit be forged between countries of origin and countries of destination? Some of these answers will be contained in Part II of this article next week.

To be continued.

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