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Sunday , October 16, 2005

from the RINGSIDE

Global Migration

Need for international response

NEW YORK: Given the present paranoia on security and terrorism, international migration can scarcely be a popular theme. It is another matter that terrorist attacks have come from homegrown terrorists rather than illegal migrants. The three differentials of demography, development and democracy will drive the world to accept freer movement of people and an orderly response, both national and international, would contribute to stability and global good. The ingredients of a coherent migration policy have been outlined in the Report of the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) entitled ‘‘Migration in an Integrated World: New Directions for Action’’. These comprise of the following core elements:

FIRST and foremost, a mindset change in which all stakeholders accept the mutuality of benefit in pursuing a more liberal migration policy. Apart from an early conclusion of the WTO Mode IV negotiations primarily on service providers, long-term demand-supply projections of labour force and skill requirements need greater dialogue between States and all stakeholders. The private sectors, including large multinationals, need to pool their requirements for persuading recipient countries to accept additional migrants. Equally, countries of origin need to invest in human resource development and skill inculcation for better managing evolving demand-supply dynamics. This exercise must be open and transparent. The current practice of private sector encouraging irregular migrants, with or without the active connivance of the authorities, to accept wages and work conditions below accepted norms is not sustainable.

SECOND, given the multiplier effects of large remittances on many economies, managing a growing volume of inward remittances is a complex challenge. These include encouraging larger flows through official channels by making them more attractive, enlarging banking network in rural areas either by themselves or pooling resources with other banks. A significant reduction in the present cost of official remittance is critical. In some countries, remittance cost is an unacceptable high of 15-20% which is usurious given modern systems of electronic transfer. Persuading recipients to better utilise remittance proceeds, without micro-managing private transfers, for balancing consumption needs with creation of capital assets needs greater dialogue, enhanced confidence, engagement with the diaspora and an attractive investment environment.

THIRD, the challenge of irregular migration has several dimensions. States exercising their sovereign right to determine who should enter and remain in their territory are also obligated to protect rights of migrants, particularly human rights including the right of refugees and asylum seekers. This requires wider consultation with employers, trade unions, civil society and migrant welfare organisations.

FOURTH, while temporary migration which is contractual in nature has multiple

advantages by mitigating the adverse consequences of brain-drain in many societies and bringing the benefits of enhanced skills and technology, it is not a substitute for addressing issues of endemic labour shortages. The integration of migrants in host countries needs active encouragement of national authorities and civil societies in a manner which while preserving the cultural identities of migrants does not disturb the social cohesiveness of recipient societies. There is no perfect answer nor a universal recipe but it needs to be addressed in an objective and sensitive manner.

FIFTH, the legal and normative framework affecting international migrants lacks cohesion and consistency. The large number of existing conventions, many unratified, lack commitment, awareness and enforcement. Not all countries have the experience and capacity to address the challenges of international migration. Bilateral arrangements, regional alliances and a global framework require expertise and resources. The issue of minimising the cost and simplifying procedures on remittances involve issues like banking reform, awareness campaign, increasing bank branches in semi-urban and rural areas. Merging the activities of existing UN bodies which may have overlapping functions may be rational but not easy. Jealous turf protection is a hallmark of international bureaucracy. There is need to create a new entity like an inter-agency global migration facility which coordinates the activities of diverse UN agencies and meets the financial needs to support many migration-related activities. Indeed, this could be one positive outcome of the proposed UN General Assembly high-level dialogue on international migration scheduled for 2006-end.

FINALLY, national governments themselves do not have a coherent response. India has a lot to learn. There are several overlapping functions: international conventions by External Affairs; labour-related matters by the Labour Ministry; and enforcement issues by the Home Ministry. We are also somewhat unclear on how the issue of a growing number of illegal refugees from neighbouring countries can be responsibly addressed even while we seek increased access for our skilled and semi-skilled workers in the more prosperous countries. Different Ministries pursue approaches which are not uniform. The truth is we do not have an international migration policy. It is time we had one. The report of the Global Migration Group is a timely wake-up call.

Concluded

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