

# Place for migrant workers in our economy

HAVE you ever talked to a migrant worker? Try asking them why they left their home, loved ones and the assured comfort of their own place of birth to work in a foreign country.

Many would say that given the choice, they would not want to undertake a journey to a foreign country, sometimes even risking their lives in the process.

There are many such migrant workers here, mainly from our neighbouring countries, who simply have no choice but come here to work because jobs are hard to come by in their homeland.

If there are jobs, the wages are too low to support their livelihoods, and they look to Malaysia as a place which offers many relatively lucrative opportunities compared to their own country.

We often take this for granted. Yes, we do offer many so-called 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning), which the locals shun. Yet, these jobs form a critical element of our economic jigsaw. Our construction projects may even grind to a halt without the migrant workers.

At one time, workers from Indonesia dominated such jobs. Now, all the on-going highway projects cannot proceed without workers from Bangladesh.

In our oil palm plantations, we rely on harvesters from Indonesia to bring the oil palm fruits on time to the mills. All palm fruits will have to be processed within 24 hours in order to obtain the maximum oil yield.

For a number of years now, plantations have experienced high losses due to unharvested fruits because of lack of workers, both locals and foreigners. Millions have been lost in revenue.

As Indonesia expands its oil palm plantations, wages there are



fast catching up with ours. Once they are on par, we would lose more Indonesian harvesters, potentially reducing further the nation's income from palm oil. It is worrying for the oil palm investors.

The reality is that all economies throughout the world need the services of migrant workers. In Britain, the buses in London would cease to run efficiently if migrant workers are not hired. In fact, the service industry in Britain are mainly staffed by migrant workers from other countries in the European Union, especially poorer nations like Romania and Bulgaria.

The irony of it all is that many Britons are against such migration. In fact, one of the main reasons behind Britain's decision to leave

the EU is immigration. Support for Brexit is largely motivated by concerns over migrant labour.

A similar story is playing out in the United States, the world's leading economic powerhouse. There, the proposed answer is to build a wall to keep out workers coming from Latin America. Yet many jobs in the US rely on migrant labour. For that matter, the US itself owes its success to immigrants. Even the thriving tech business there will have trouble prospering without the ICT talents from countries like India.

Since all the nations of the world rely one way or another on the services of migrant workers, it is only proper that we should put in place an immigration scheme that would

benefit both parties. It is not sustainable if only one side of the arrangement benefits. It has to be a win-win system.

It is understandable that migrant workers will have to pay some amount of levies for the services that they will enjoy as temporary citizens of the country. These include health, security and education for their children. But at the same time, the levies should not be too prohibitive, burdening the migrant workers instead of helping them.

The recent decision by the government to revise the rates of the levies downward are welcomed by many. In the past, not only migrant workers but also the businesses which employ them have complained about the exorbitant levies.

Whatever the scheme, it would be retrogressive if we allow migrant workers to be brought into our country just to be exploited by some unscrupulous individuals to build their own fortunes!

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