

Brief:

Colombo Process – Regional Consultative Process on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia

Background

1. Some three million Asian workers (men and women) leave their countries each year to work overseas. A large proportion of these workers (from South and Southeast Asia) head for the Gulf States while some others move to North America, Europe and other Asian countries.
2. As Asian overseas worker populations grow in numbers and diversify in terms of destination and source countries, their impact is increasingly felt regionally and internationally. Overall numbers of Asian overseas workers are likely to increase due to declining working populations in many industrialized economies, combined with continued need for skilled / low-skilled workers.
3. Countries of origin are increasingly engaged in protecting their overseas workers from exploitative practices in recruitment and employment, in providing them with appropriate services before departure and during their stay overseas, as well as in assisting them in their return and reintegration back home.
4. Countries of origin affirmed that greater efforts are needed to improve regional response to the challenges of labour mobility and to optimize the benefits of organized labour mobility including the development of new markets and increasing remittance flows through formal channels; building institutional capacity and inter-ministerial coordination; increasing cooperation with destination countries in protecting temporary contractual workers; providing better access to labour markets; and preventing irregular labour mobility.

Ministerial consultations

5. In response to calls from ten Asian overseas workers source countries, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) together with the Government of Sri Lanka, organized a ministerial consultation of countries of origin in Asia in April 2003 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The ten participating states were Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. The ten Ministers of Labour made recommendations for the effective management of overseas employment programmes and agreed to regularly meet for follow-up.
6. The ten countries met for the second time in September 2004 in Manila, the Philippines to review and monitor the implementation of the recommendations made in Colombo and to identify areas of future action. Afghanistan was invited as an observer, and the ministerial consultations became known as the "Colombo Process".
7. The third ministerial consultation was held in Bali, Indonesia in September 2005, where Afghanistan became a full member of the grouping. The meeting in Bali was further enriched with the attendance of several countries of destination, namely, Bahrain, Italy, Kuwait, Malaysia, Qatar, Korea, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. International and regional organizations

were also invited to this meeting, namely, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Department for International Development, UK (DFID), European Commission (EC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and World Bank.

8. As the Colombo Process evolved with each ministerial consultation, new members and partners have joined and the regional consultation has expanded in scope while maintaining its key themes and focus. The Colombo Process aims to continue to provide a forum for dialogue among labour countries of origin and is set to evolve and contribute to strengthening the management of temporary contractual labour mobility in the Asian region.

Objectives

9. The aim of the Colombo Process is to provide a forum for Asian countries of origin of temporary contractual workers to:
 - Share experiences, lessons learned and best practices on overseas contractual employment;
 - Consult on issues faced by overseas workers and propose practical solutions for the well-being of overseas workers particularly the most vulnerable ones;
 - Optimize development benefits from organized overseas employment, and enhance dialogue with countries of destination; and
 - Review and monitor the implementation of ministerial recommendations and identify further steps for action.

Themes

10. The three themes of the Colombo Process are the following:
 - Protection of and provision of services to temporary overseas contractual workers – In particular, protecting these workers from abusive practices in recruitment and employment, and providing appropriate services in terms of pre-departure information and orientation and welfare provisions.
 - Optimizing benefits of organized labour mobility – This includes the development of new overseas employment markets, increasing remittance flows through formal, cheap, fast and reliable channels and enhancing the development impact of remittances.
 - Capacity building, data collection and inter-state cooperation – This includes institutional capacity building and information exchange to meet labour migration challenges; increasing cooperation with destination countries in the protection of migrant workers and access to labour markets; and enhancing cooperation among countries of origin.

Secretariat

11. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has provided technical support to the Colombo Process since its inception and serves as its Secretariat.

Achievements

12. Sharing of good practices, data and information through regular dialogue among countries of origin of overseas contractual workers in Asia.
13. Comprehensive training curriculum for labour attachés and overseas employment administrators was developed; and joint training courses were implemented in Kuwait (2004), Bangkok (2005), China (2006) and Islamabad (2006).
14. Regional workshop for employment agencies in Asia on placing workers in Europe and ethical recruitment was held in Manila (2006).
15. A number of policy studies have been carried out to support the efforts of the Process' participating governments on the following topics:
 - Protection of migrant workers
 - Capacity building and inter-state cooperation
 - Regulatory frameworks for recruitment of migrant workers
 - Minimum standard employment contracts
 - Pre-departure orientation programs: best practices
 - Welfare funds for migrant workers
 - Training and skill development for migrant labour
 - Flow, utilization policies on migrant workers' remittances
16. A feasibility study to establish an Overseas Workers Resource Centre (OWRC) in one of the contractual labour destination countries in the GCC has been completed; this could provide vital information and support services to labour migrants and governments.
17. Implementation at national level of recommendations adopted at the Ministerial Consultations.
18. Organizing the first "Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin and Destination in Asia" hosted by the Government of the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi in January 2008 and attended by Colombo Process countries and nine countries of destination ("Abu Dhabi Dialogue").
19. Organizing the first "Asia-EU Consultation on Labour Migration" held in Brussels in April 2008 attended by Colombo Process countries and 16 EU member states.