

“Irrational decision” to close migrant labour offices in Sri Lankan embassies

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The news came as a shock to migrant workers, associations and non-governmental organisations working on behalf of migrant workers.

A report in the Sunday Times last week said that newly-appointed Labour Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva had directed the shutting down of the labour offices in Sri Lankan missions overseas, saying the government was spending more than Rs. 900 million annually to maintain them and was losing money. The Minister had said that the government had decided to hand over to the Foreign Relations Ministry the responsibility of looking after the welfare of migrant workers.

The report said that separate labour sections were set up in Sri Lankan missions in countries where there was a sizable number of Sri Lanka workers, ironically on a proposal made by the then Labour Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa (now Prime Minister) during President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s tenure in 1994, following claims that migrant workers’ issues were not being addressed properly by Sri Lanka’s foreign missions.

The Minister’s contention that the government is spending over Rs. 900 million on these labour sections and the fact that it is not profitable in an industry that brings in an annual labour remittance revenue of over US\$6 billion is unacceptable, according to Andrew Samuel from Community Development Services which is actively engaged in ensuring the rights of migrant workers. “We think that the government is not investing enough in the rights, protection and social welfare of migrant workers and their families,” he has said.

As I took stock of the situation, I could hear the trio discussing similar issues during their Thursday morning ‘mini-conference’ under the margosa tree. “*Mage yaluwa Padmawathi Abu Dhabi walin avith giya sumane, den nirodhanaya sthanayaka innawa. Eya kiyana eha pita-rata wala den rassawal ne kiyala* (My friend Padmawathi returned from Abu Dhabi last week and was sent to a quarantine centre. She says the situation in West Asia for jobs is bleak),” said *Kussi Amma Sera*. “*Mata ehila thiyenawa nirodhana sthana wala kattiyawa hondata balagannawa kiyala* (I am told the facilities at the quarantine centres are good and returnees are well looked after),” noted *Serapina*. “*Mage godak yaluwo thaama Dubai rate hirawela innawa, enna vidihak nethuwa. Eh gollange rassa conthariththu evarai* (Many of my friends who are still stuck in Dubai are unable to return. Their contracts have expired),” said *Mabel Rasthiyadu*, adding that the government should organise more flights to bring them back.

While they were chatting and I walked into the kitchen to collect my mug of tea, the phone rang. It was know-all neighbour *Haramanis* of broken-English fame. “I shay, why is the government recalling our labour officers from abroad? They are doing some good work, noh?” he said.

“Yes, I was also surprised by the announcement. While there are some instances where these labour officers have not been helpful, by and large, migrant workers particularly domestic workers rely on

them when facing problems. They are also responsible for setting up safe houses in missions to aid workers who need another place to stay," I said.

"Migrant workers need some support mechanism abroad and this system has been working well," he said. "The government should not look at it as spending money, but as an investment in caring for more than a million workers in West Asia who are mostly affected by irregular contracts, harassment in the workplace and non- payment of wages," I said.

We discussed at length the issues pertaining to migrant workers and the irrational decision of the government to recall these labour officers who number more than 100 in our missions in West Asia and other countries.

According to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment website, a total of 3,809 complaints were received in 2018 of which 3,019 were from female workers (mostly housemaids). The complaints were about breach of employment contracts, harassment (both physical and sexual), deaths (237 which included 27 suicides) and premature termination of employment among others.

For the record, remittances from workers overseas represent the highest foreign exchange received by the country and thus illustrates the importance of taking care of these workers as an investment and not as a cost to the government. Over the past five years, remittances totalled \$6.7 billion in 2019; \$7 billion in 2018; \$7.1 billion in 2017; \$7.2 billion in 2016; and \$7 billion in 2015. Over 200,000 workers find new jobs or have their contracts renewed every year.

The decision to recall the labour officers has been taken without any analysis of the situation particularly the work undertaken by these sections. Very often, it is to labour officers at missions abroad that migrant workers, with a problem, turn for help. These labour officers are also equipped and trained to deal with common problems faced by workers, which other officers attached to these missions would find difficult to manage as they lack expertise and proper training.

Furthermore, more than 90 per cent of the work of Sri Lankan missions in West Asia involves dealing with migrant workers and their welfare. There is also the problem of unregistered workers who often seek the assistance of labour officers at our missions, when they are in trouble.

In the meantime, about 15,000 Sri Lankan migrant workers have returned on repatriation flights, while 40,000 to 50,000 more are seeking to return as they have completed their contracts, and in all these cases labour officers have been coordinating the process with the help of other mission officers at that end.

"We urge the honourable Minister of Labour, Nimal Siripala de Silva to reconsider his decision and ensure the Labour Sections are not shut down and ensure that our migrant workers' rights, protection and welfare are looked into without taking shortsighted policy decisions," pleaded Mr. Samuel on behalf of the migrant workers.

While the news of a shut-down of labour offices in Sri Lankan missions where there are many Sri Lankan workers is a severe blow to migrant workers and their families (who rely on labour officers for information on a migrant who has gone missing or who has not contacted home for many months), the government needs to remember that Sri Lanka's import bill is funded largely by the sweat and tears of earnings of migrant workers and, as such, drastic measures should be avoided. Also part of the money spent on labour officers attached to missions comes from registration fees and the compulsory insurance premium paid by migrant workers which means that migrant workers are to some extent paying for the services including the recruitment of labour officers to Sri Lankan missions.

Unlike other big foreign exchange earners like garments or tea which have powerful associations to negotiate and canvass the government on issues that concern their sectors, the same cannot be said of the overseas labour-generating sector which, unfortunately, doesn't have similar clout and strength like garments, tea or any other export sector. Once a year, the Labour Minister briefs Parliament, and proudly at that, about the annual contribution to foreign exchange earnings by migrant workers, but beyond that there is little or no engagement, since migrant workers don't have a strong and powerful association to defend their rights and look after their interests. Recruitment agents have their own association to look after their interests, while though there are migrant worker interest groups they are not powerful enough to lobby for support.

At that moment Kussi Amma Sera brought my second mug of tea, saying: "*Sir, ape pita rata inna lamaiwa balaganna kawuruth ne* (Sir, our migrant workers are a neglected lot)." I nodded in agreement and hoped the government would reverse the decision to close labour offices abroad and instead - if it means cutting costs - reduce the number of other officers in foreign missions, while retaining labour officers who play a vital role in looking after the welfare of migrant workers.

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