



NTS ALERT

Managing Migration

The International Organisation for Migration refers to “migration management” as the range of measures needed to effectively address migration issues at national, regional and global levels. However, generating such measures is an uphill task due to the constant clash of national and international interests as well as governmental and non-governmental action. In addition to this, the demand and supply for migrants and the rise of other security threats factor in significantly to the complex equation. This edition takes a brief look at why this is so.

The Pros and Cons of Migration

Migration in Asia is largely characterised by being in search of better opportunities and livelihoods. Poverty and unemployment in one’s own country encourages venturing overseas to the more well-off neighbouring countries, which are believed to have an abundance of opportunities. Globalisation has further increased the rate of migration as states are more interdependent for their needs. Wealthier Asian states have since the 1980s been in need of low skilled workers to do jobs that the locals would not likely do – also known as 3D work: dirty, dangerous and difficult.

During the Asian miracle period in the 1980s, there was a great influx of migrants into the “Little Dragon” states of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea, which were fast developing and in need of workers. The 1980s also witnessed a “feminization of

migration” with the rise in the demand for domestic workers, largely hailing from the Philippines, Indonesia and parts of South Asia. In the 1990s, migrant workers from China made their mark in the global labour migrant trade. Though often paid low wages, migrant workers still appreciate their opportunities overseas as they are relatively better than back home.

Labour migration is also significant for labour sending countries. Remittances from overseas workers into one’s home country has in part benefited the economy. In an article by Manolo Abella (Martin et al, 2004), Chief of the International Migration Branch in the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Philippines, is noted as a major exporter of labour with 3 million legal Overseas Foreign Workers, about 2 million unauthorized migrants abroad, and an additional 2.4 million Filipinos who are immigrants and naturalized citizens in other countries. These 7.4 million Filipinos abroad remit almost \$8 billion a year, equivalent to 10 percent of the Philippines’ GDP and as much as the revenue from the agriculture, fishery, and forestry sectors combined, which together employ about 12 million Filipinos.

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In South Asia, remittances from overseas migrant workers accounted for more than half of Bangladesh's development budget, most of Pakistan's foreign-exchange sources and reduced India's trade deficit by 40%. In many cases the remittances exceeded funds given to their countries by Western donors, thus avoiding a dependency on foreign aid. Hence, while poverty and unemployment are still high in many labour-exporting countries, it would be far worse if not for this emigration trend.

While the benefits of overseas employment are attractive, there are several setbacks. For one, the rights of migrant workers are often violated. According to the ILO, the most vulnerable groups of labour migrants – in terms of adequate protection and limited legal rights today are domestic workers, irregular workers and temporary workers, which are particularly widespread in Asia. This is due to the increased competition in the regional labour market, which has resulted in lower standards of labour migration policies in the receiving states. Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to various forms of discrimination, exploitation, and abuse by virtue of their gender, temporary migrant status, and the nature and location of their work within their employers' homes". Despite this, the economic gains overseas and pitiful circumstances in their home country still provide impetus for labour migrants.

Studies have noted that migrant workers have also in many instances been blamed for social problems in labour receiving countries. In Malaysia, for example, the influx of Indonesian labour coincided with the increase in crime rates especially in the 1990s. While some Indonesians were implicated and convicted for crimes ranging from petty theft, rape and even high-profile murders, the bulk of Indonesian migrant workers became the whipping boy and had to bear the brunt of adverse Malaysian government policies that followed such as poor living conditions and abuse in detention centers and deportation (Liow, 2003).

Safeguarding the well-being of migrant workers is therefore paramount. At one level, they are the primary vehicles that facilitate economic development of both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. Hence, meeting migrants' needs would be economically viable as it would encourage them to be more efficient at work.

Migrant workers in Thailand

In a research project jointly organized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand, key findings on the realities of young migrant workers in Thailand reflected their poor working conditions, which encouraged exploitative action against them. The migrants sampled were primarily from neighbouring Myanmar with some from Cambodia and Laos. They were largely in their late teens and early twenties, out of which 75% of them were women. And all worked for Thai employers. Amongst the findings:-

- More than 40% of migrant domestic workers were paid only 1000 baht per month (barely 30 USD) or less. Nearly 89% received 3000 baht per month (about 85 USD) or less.
- Around 20% of migrants on fishing boats claimed they were forced to work
- More than 90% of workers in the agriculture, fishing and manufacturing sectors had no written contract and less than 50% of them were in possession of their original identity documents.
- Around 60% of migrant domestic workers weren't allowed to leave the premises to meet with others and 8% claimed they had been physically confined or 'locked up' by the employer
- About half of all employers agreed with a statement that asked whether migrant workers 'should be locked in at night to make sure they don't escape'
- Nearly half (45%) of those in the fishing sector and about 4 out of 5 (82%) of domestic workers say they work more than 12 hours a day.

Source

The Mekong Challenge – Underpaid, Overworked and Overlooked: The Realities of Young Migrant Workers in Thailand, *Institute of Labour Organisation*, Dec 2006

However, such a reason would only perhaps appease governments and does not take into account the views and concerns of the migrant workers themselves. Government action would be limited as they would implement policies, which would benefit the state rather than the migrant worker as individuals. More importantly, migrants' rights would still be

jeopardized for the sake of economic gain. It would ignore the suffering inflicted on illegal migrants, such as sex workers, who are highly exploited due to the nature of their work, thus bringing little benefit to themselves and has the potential to threaten the rest of society with the spread of infectious diseases such as AIDS.

What is, therefore, needed in migration management policies is a cooperative process in which all participants have a voice, including governments and civil societies of the sending countries, the receiving populations and the migrant workers themselves. Governments need to understand that by providing the right mechanisms for migrant workers, countries can mitigate a range of other threats to security such as illegal migration, human trafficking, transnational crime, spread of infectious diseases and even unnecessary tensions with neighbouring states.

States must acknowledge the importance of agency for migrant workers and the dynamic self-sustaining nature of migratory processes when devising migration policies. Moreover, it should be understood that non-migration policies may be more powerful in shaping migration than actual migration policies. A major cause of both economic and forced migration is the huge gap between states' economic prosperity, social conditions, security and human rights. Economic development, conflict resolution and reconstruction measures in labour-sending countries can also play a part in reducing migration pressures. Such a holistic approach therefore requires input from various sectors of society. The challenge lies in consolidating these inputs and ensuring that the ultimate goal of mainstreaming the rights of migrants is not lost in the process.

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Intergovernmental Efforts to Address Migration

The United Nations (UN) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) have adopted numerous resolutions, conventions and recommendations for the protection of migrant workers. Yet not much has been done in response to these agreements. The UN's *1990 Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families*, for instance, would be a fitting example. Although developed in 1990, the convention only came into action in 2003 as it needed to attain ratification from 20 states. However prospects remain bleak as to how effective the convention will come into play, given the fact that most of the countries that ratified the convention were labour- sending states. Many labour receiving states have yet to ratify the Convention. As far as Asia is concerned, only East Timor, Philippines and Sri Lanka have ratified it. Bangladesh, Cambodia and Indonesia have signed it, which still isn't enough as it only expresses their intention of adhering to the Conventions. More importantly, no major Asian labour-receiving country has signed, what more ratify the Convention. Without commitment and cooperation by these mentioned countries, it would be difficult to implement and monitor migrant policies effectively.

It could very well be the case that countries feel they are not prepared to adhere to the rules of the Convention, which are of much higher standards than of other agreements as it includes both documented and undocumented migrants. The Conventions of the ILO's on the other hand, make a distinction between documented and undocumented migrants by adopting conventions pertaining to specific groups of workers and employment issues, such as the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention in 1957 and the Maritime Labour Convention in 2006 (see ILO's database of International Standards for a list of the Conventions <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/subjlst.htm>). Despite these relatively more specific conventions, many countries still fail to ratify them.

What also undermines the hopes of those on the migration trail is the reluctance of countries supplying





the labour - and hence the most victimised - to agree even among themselves on common standards of labour rights and protection they would want upheld by the receiving countries. This stems from the competition between the supplying countries to get as many of their unskilled citizens employed abroad due to the foreign exchange they send back home.

Middle Eastern countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia top the list of nations that receive the bulk of Asian migrant workers. East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea and South-east Asian countries as Singapore and Malaysia are also a magnet for migrants. Still, for labour rights activists, the 1990 Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families is a significant first step in securing a number of rights to protect the world's migrant workers, which add up to some 130 million.

In December 2006, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) launched the *Core Labour Standards Handbook*, a result of the organisations' efforts in ensuring a regional technical assistance project to promote and improve labor standards since 1999. The ILO believes that decent working conditions help reduce poverty, raise living standards, and enhance the quality of economic growth by increasing productivity. The handbook aims to inform ADB staff on ILO's core labor standards. This has also been a useful tool for putting into practice proper employment standards in various ADB country operations.

Regional efforts have thus been initiated as a stepping stone in ensuring global cooperation. By working through regional mechanisms such as ASEAN and SAARC, it is believed that the regional and cultural similarities would facilitate greater understanding and effective decision-making amongst states. However, much of this remains problematic. In early 2007, members of ASEAN signed the *Cebu Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers*, in which governments pledged to ensure decent working conditions, protection from all forms of abuse and a guaranteed wage to migrant workers from within the region. The accord, however, is not legally binding and does not require governments to change their labor laws. Nonetheless the Declaration is the first of its kind in the region and marks a significant milestone in addressing the issue

of migration. Regional officials have noted that given time, a stronger and more binding agreement may be proposed in the future.

The accord provides for workers who are arrested or detained to be given access to their embassies, while victims of discrimination, abuse, exploitation and violence should be given access to the legal and judicial services of the host government. It also calls for stiffer penalties for illegal recruiters and smugglers of humans. However, the accord would not be used to legalize migrants working without work permits.

However, critics argue that a close reading of the declaration would reveal that there is only reference to migrants from within ASEAN countries. This, therefore disregards the immense numbers of South Asian migrants that have contributed much to the economies of Malaysia and Singapore. In the case of the former, this declaration would not even cover the some 170,000 Nepali migrants, being the second largest nationality group of migrants workers, or those from countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other non-ASEAN countries.

Undocumented migrants are also not covered in the declaration. As such the millions of undocumented migrants, some of whom are really refugees, be it from Burma, Aceh Indonesia, Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines, are not covered with regard to rights in this declaration. The extension of access of consular functions and diplomatic assistance of member ASEAN countries when an ASEAN migrant is arrested or committed to prison or custody or detained in any other manner, under the laws and regulations of the receiving state seem to be a good thing especially when in that receiving country there is no embassy and/or consulate of the country from where the affected ASEAN migrant originates.

Even so, other regional initiatives in the past have addressed some issues pertaining to undocumented migrants, in particular human trafficking, which make up a significant portion of global trafficking. According to the International Organisation for Migration (2000), it is estimated that a third of global trafficking trade, or about 200,000 – 225,000 women and children, are trafficked annually from Southeast Asia. Moreover, 60% of this trafficking occurs within Southeast Asia. Not only does human trafficking violate human rights, it is also linked to other

transnational crime issues and is also a source for the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV.

ASEAN has attempted to address the issue by signing a *Declaration on Transnational Crime* and developing a *Plan of Action on Transnational Crime* in 1997 and 1999 respectively – aimed at establishing a cohesive regional strategy to prevent, control and neutralize transnational crime through regional cooperation and mutual assistance.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) also did their part to address human trafficking by adopting a *Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution* in January 2002, during its Eleventh Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal. The Convention called for cooperation amongst Member States in dealing with various aspects of prevention, interdiction and suppression of trafficking in women and children for prostitution, and repatriation and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking. It also called for prevention of use of women and children in international prostitution networks, particularly where countries of the region are the countries of origin, transit and destination. However, similar to the Cebu Declaration, much of details of these mentioned documents are vague and non-legally binding thus allowing states the leeway of not acting upon the initiatives at their will.

Given the plethora of regional initiatives and agreements signed, why is it that problems associated with migration still exist? The fact remains that sovereign states are still at liberty to implement their own policies where they see fit with regards to their own security. Moreover, states often implement stricter legislation against migration, which does little to stem the movement of people who are determined to seek employment and better opportunities overseas than in their own country. This thus spawns even more problems with regard to illegal migration as migrants are at a greater risk of facing exploitation and violation of their rights.

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Malaysia's Controversial Legislation

Since the 1990s, migrant workers (in particular Indonesians) have often been blamed for rising crime rates in Malaysia. In a bid to stem the problem, the Malaysian government has announced plans to introduce new legislation to restrict the movement of migrants and holding their employers accountable for migrants' conduct.

The proposed bill has received much criticism from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as migrant employers. For one, limiting migrant's movement to their workplace or living quarters violates their right to freedom of movement and comes with the assumption that all migrant workers are potential wrongdoers. Moreover, holding employers accountable for migrants' wrongdoings could potentially increase the degree of exploitation amongst migrant workers as employees would employ strict rules to ensure that their migrant workers stay out of trouble. According to Human Rights Watch senior researcher Nisha Varia, domestic workers would still have to 'rely on the whim of employers rather than the rule of law for decent working conditions'.

Another flaw of the proposed bill would be that it only concerns documented workers. Such a limited scope would therefore, according to Jacob George (President of the NGO, Cassa) omit the estimated 3.5 million illegal workers in Malaysia, who ought to be monitored as well. These illegal migrants could possibly be more prone to crime due to their lack of legal protection and higher likelihood of exploitation and poor living conditions.

Employers of migrants have also voiced dissatisfaction with the bill which proposes that their thumbprints be





recorded to hold them accountable for their foreign workers' misconduct. Such a proposal thus also goes against the rights of employers, who run the risk of being wrongly accused for their workers' misconduct. The Malaysian Trades Union Congress added that such measures of monitoring the movements of workers after working hours goes too far. Other employers have suggested that thumbprints of workers, themselves be recorded instead rather than their employers.

Irene Fernandez, director of the women's advocacy group, Tenaganita noted that it would be more beneficial for the Malaysian government to organize post-arrival orientation programmes for migrants to explain to them the laws and culture of the country as well as brief them about their rights as migrant workers and other relevant information. Current programmes are rather ineffective as they are held at the migrants' point of departure and do not include any active participation from employers.

In May 2006, Indonesia and Malaysia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to regulate migration of domestic workers. Positive measures included the introduction of a standard contract and protections against cutting workers' salaries to repay fees borne by the employer. It, however, still gives employers the liberty to keep workers' passports, prohibits workers from marrying and fails to introduce clear standards on a minimum wage, a weekly day off or monitoring mechanisms for labour agencies.

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Learning from the Philippines

With an estimated 3 million legal Overseas Foreign Workers (OFW) and another 2 million undocumented migrants abroad, the Philippines is indeed a major exporter of labour the world over. The Filipino government has also been one of the most active Asian states in ensuring that the rights of its citizens are safeguarded.

More than half (about 60%) of Filipino migrants are women, thus making the need for support mechanism more important. Moreover, the Filipino government has initiated non-migration policies that complement other issues that migrant workers are concerned with, such as political rights and their social security in their motherland. Such initiatives have been due to the efforts of strong advocacy both at governmental and non-governmental levels. Some of the initiatives are as follows:-

- ❑ The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), funded by a \$25 fee collected from migrants, provides emergency services and, in some places, medical care from offices at 28 Philippine embassies. The OWWA also operates shelters abroad for migrants who run away from abusive employers and is expanding its activities for returned migrants.
- ❑ The Associated Marine Officers' and Seamen's Union of the Philippines (AMOSUP) which has been a leader in training, protecting, and reintegrating Filipinos who are contract workers on ships.
- ❑ Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995 (Republic Act 8042). This was a result of the Flor Contemplacion case in Singapore, where a Filipino maid was hanged for killing a fellow maid and child in her care. With the immense public outrage in the Philippines, the Philippine government became far more active in urging the UN to convene a global conference on international migration.

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The HIV Connection

In Indonesia, a 2006 UNAIDS report estimates that 210,000 people live with HIV/AIDS. With the majority of those living with HIV being in the most productive age group, the epidemic has also made inroads into the working world, including the migrant worker sector. As such migrants have been categorized as a high-risk group, due to their high mobility overseas and away from partners and families. Female migrant workers are even more vulnerable as they make up 75% of the total number of migrants in Indonesia, mostly working as domestic helpers or in the entertainment industry.

Moreover, the lack of information available to potential and existing migrant workers regarding the disease perpetuates the possibility of the spread of HIV via migrants. Most migrants hail from rural areas where information networks are minimal. Moreover, language barriers and misconceptions about HIV further increase proper information dissemination. Many of those infected with HIV are often unaware that they have the disease. Out of the estimated 210,000 HIV infected Indonesians, only 11,000 of these cases have been recorded. The reason is that many people are unwilling to find out their HIV status, given the stigma and discrimination associated with it

Such beliefs are even present in migrant receiving countries, which have enforced mandatory testing for HIV and other communicable diseases to ensure that their countries remain free of HIV. While this is important in curtailing a potential epidemic, current measures have, to an extent, impeded migrants' opportunities of venturing out in search for a source of livelihood. Testing has become the benchmark of whether a potential migrant worker is fit to work overseas. Moreover, workers' recruitment agencies and medical centers hardly inform potential migrant worker regarding the procedures and the outcome of the communicable diseases tests. In 2005, for instance, out of the 13,000 who underwent testing, the Association of Medical Clinics for Indonesian Overseas Migrant Workers (HIPTEK) recorded 161 potential migrant workers as HIV positive. Yet, none have received details of their health status and have been dismissed without any explanation.

- ❑ The Philippines Overseas Employment Administration enters into a bilateral agreement with Indonesia for the promotion and protection of both Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers' rights in 2003.
- ❑ Establishment of Overseas Filipino Workers One-Stop Center, which provides services to both sea-farers and land-based workers in 2003.
- ❑ Overseas Absentee Voting Law of 2003. This legislation provides Filipinos living and working overseas the right to vote during elections.
- ❑ Signing of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003, and approval of the law's Implementing Rules and Regulations. This comprehensive anti-trafficking law outlaws trafficking in persons and imposes penalties for prostitution, sexual exploitation and slavery.
- ❑ The Expanded Livelihood Development Program (ELDP) by the OWWA, The ELDP provides advice to returning OFWs who want to launch small businesses - sewing garments, making furniture, going into pig or poultry farming, or opening small stores or service establishments such as tailoring or beauty parlors.
- ❑ The Social Security System (SSS) launched the OFW Flexi-Fund provident fund to provide a retirement protection scheme for OFWs.

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Such labour migration measures have, in fact, increased the likelihood of migrants attaining employment illegally. Failing health tests does not deter migrants from seeking overseas employment even without legal documents. This only results in further migration problems as the risks for





undocumented workers are higher as they are not protected by law and more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Amongst other problems associated with illegal migration, such as exploitation, especially amongst female migrant workers forced into the sex trade, could potentially increase the spread of HIV. Furthermore, the lack of legal protection leaves illegal migrants very little choice who would fear seeking medical treatment for fear of being deported.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) officials have suggested that broader access to information and health care in countries of origin and destination are, therefore, vital in stemming the spread of diseases and illegal migration. The ILO has been pushing for migrant-friendly testing that complies with the guiding principles of VCT (Voluntary Counselling and Testing), which would ensure that HIV would not affect a person's employment status. Building the awareness and capacity of recruitment agencies, including trainers, instructors and dormitory heads, is vital as personnel in this field have immense influence over potential migrant workers. It is also important to strengthen the involvement of village authorities so as they are the first gateway for information for potential migrant workers determined to pursue their ambitions overseas.

This push for a more sensitive approach to HIV/AIDS has already found favour in the Philippines, a country that is said to be the world's largest exporter of organised labour and is a major source of migrant labour to the Middle East, East Asia, Europe and the United States. Of this South-east Asian country's 35 million labour force, one in five people, or 7.4 million, are classified as overseas workers.

"We support the ILO's initiatives to provide assistance to protect and prevent migrant workers from HIV," said Rosalinda Dimapilis-Baldoz, head of the government-run Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA). She added that this awareness must however be matched by similar efforts in the host country.

Elsewhere in Asia, Burma continues to grapple with one of the worst HIV/AIDS epidemics in Asia—a struggle made all the harder by the tiny amounts of international aid received by the military government. Migrant worker and sex workers are amongst the populations most at risk of contracting HIV in Burma.

There have been problems in accessing these groups, but UNAIDS points out that more support has been forthcoming from the authorities. UNAIDS estimated that 360,000 people were living with the virus in 2005, and national adult HIV prevalence stood at 1.3 percent. The official HIV/AIDS program has a budget of US \$200,000—just 60 US cents per person in a population of 30 million.

Although condom use has more than tripled since 1999, and access to antiretroviral treatment has increased markedly, HIV/AIDS services need to be significantly scaled up. According to Yasuda Tadashi, an HIV/AIDS project officer in Rangoon, such services are still only available in less than one-third of the country.

A relatively new UNICEF project, involving Buddhist leaders to promote HIV prevention, has been introduced in Burma. The project has been long established in neighboring countries and is geared towards reducing the stigma associated with being HIV-positive. While it is common for villagers to shun a family where a member is believed to be HIV positive, acceptance from a Buddhist monk who is willing to visit the family, and to accept food and rice from them would greatly reduce discrimination against HIV carriers and their families in that community.

A group of foreign and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is also offering a range of care and prevention services that will assist over a million people. According to Andrew Kirkwood, head of Save the Children Myanmar [Burma], one of the NGOs spearheading the initiative Work will be done in disease hot-spots, such as northern states, where there is high migration and high vulnerability.

Stigma and discrimination are serious impediments to fighting the epidemic. The self-help groups that confront prejudice, common in many other countries where HIV/AIDS is prevalent, are rarely seen in the country—mainly due to the government's dislike of any organized activity outside their control.

Nonetheless, these groups persevere to achieve their goals. While the Burmese government remains suspicious of the few informal [HIV/AIDS support] groups that exist, Choo Phuah, Myanmar's director of the International HIV Alliance is determined in uniting the groups to form a body that would be able to

influence the response and reassure the state of their noble cause.

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NTS- Asia Coordinator
Mely Caballero Anthony

NTS-Asia Research Analyst
/ Webmaster
Sofiah Jamil



NTS Alert Team
Mely Caballero Anthony
Sofiah Jamil
Sujoyini Mandal

Website
www.rsis-ntsasia.org
webmaster@rsis-ntsasia.org

Bangladeshi "Migrants" in India

Over the years, India has implemented several measures in a bid to curb what they presume to be as illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Oftentimes, Bangladeshi nationals, when identified, could face up to a six month term in jail or face deportation.

Such was the case in early 2003, for example when, the Bangladesh government strongly criticised India's campaign of forcing Bengali speaking people out of India into Bangladesh. Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury said India was in gross violation of international law by targeting Bengali-speaking Muslims, who it had incorrectly identified as illegal immigrants. He went on to express grave concern over the fate of at least 200 people who remained stateless and lived in miserable conditions – lack of food and water - in no-man's-land between the two countries.

India claimed that they were illegal immigrants and alleged that there were 20 million Bangladeshis living illegally in India. This, India noted, was a security threat and hence deportation was vital. Bangladesh, however, has also denied the "migrants" entry as it assumes that the vast majority were Bengali-speaking Indian citizens who had no right to live in Bangladesh.

In 2005, India's Supreme Court has scrapped a controversial law in the state of Assam that had been used to identify and deport illegal foreign migrants. The Illegal Migrants Determination through Tribunal, or IMDT Act was introduced in 1983 at the peak of a public campaign against the largely Bengali-speaking migrants. Assamese regional groups, such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU) has long opposed the IMDT, saying that the burden of proof on the state had added to illegal migration from Bangladesh. The scrapping of the law was also made possible due to the AASU's influential clout in the region.

However, Assam's minorities are appreciative of the law, which although was meant to work against them had actually provided them protection as it placed the onus of proof on the state rather than of the individual migrant. By annulling the Act, minorities have lost their only protection from persecution. United Minorities Front of Assam chairman Hafiz Rashid Ahmed Choudhury said the scrapping of IMDT would jeopardise many people belonging to linguistic and religious minorities, who would be likely to be "forcibly thrown out of Assam".

Suggestions have been made to beef up security forces along the porous Indo-Bangladesh border in the North Eastern Region. India's Border Security Force (BSF) has recommended creation of No Habitation Zone up to 150 yards of the international border in Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal. India's Ministry of Home Affairs has yet to take a final decision until the concerned States have been consulted.

The proposal would uproot the estimated population of 89,000 settled along the international border within the 150 yards range, similar to the existing zones in Punjab and Rajasthan border. Not only would this, in India's opinion, assist in alleviating the issue of illegal migrants but also aid in better patrolling and surveillance of the international border, considered the most porous, which has off late sent intelligence agencies into tizzy because of its use by terrorists and jihadis to sneak into India.

The BSF has also proposed introduction of smart card system for better detection of illegal migrants in villages of Indian states bordering Bangladesh, including Assam. The system, which is being used in several countries, contains all vital data of the local population, facilitating prompt detection.

India has already decided to expedite the fencing of the border, but given the terrain intelligence agencies have warned that the measures may not be enough.

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