

EDITORIAL

"When I see the migrant workers' broken bodies and eyes without hope, I want to embrace and wipe away their fears. It makes me angry and helps me to keep fighting the oppressive system."
- IRENE FERNANDEZ

OUR THOUGHT

LIFE AS WE KNOW DEPENDS ON THE HEALTH OF THE PLANET

While President Ranil Wickremesinghe, the splintered Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government and opposition parties are focusing on the elections, what election should be held or when and on what basis, more attention needs to be given to vital issues relating to Mother Earth, as the world marks Mother Earth Day on Monday, April 22.

In a statement, the United Nations said that Mother Earth is clearly urging a call to action. Nature is suffering. Oceans are being filled with plastic and turning more acidic. Extreme heat, wildfires and floods have affected millions of people.

Climate change, human-made changes to nature, as well as crimes that disrupt biodiversity, such as deforestation, land-use change, intensified agriculture and livestock production or the growing illegal wildlife trade, can accelerate the speed of destruction of the planet.

According to the UN, this is the third Mother Earth Day celebrated within the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Ecosystems support all life on earth. The healthier our ecosystems are, the healthier the planet and its people. Restoring our damaged ecosystems will help end poverty, combat climate change and prevent mass extinction. But, we will only succeed if everyone plays a part.

Are we aware that the planet is losing 10 million hectares of forests every year—an area larger than Iceland? A healthy ecosystem helps to protect us from diseases. Biological diversity makes it difficult for pathogens to spread rapidly. It is also estimated that around one million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction.

According to the UN, the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration provides a great opportunity to revive our natural world amidst the ongoing environmental crisis. While a decade may seem lengthy, scientists emphasize that these next ten years are pivotal in combating climate change and preventing the loss of countless species. Read the ten strategic actions within the UN Decade that can contribute to building a #GenerationRestoration. They can empower a global movement, finance restoration on the ground, set the right incentives, celebrate leadership, shift behaviours, invest in research, build up capacity, celebrate a culture of restoration, build up the next generation and listen and learn.

While world leaders are actively seeking solutions to combat climate change, in Sri Lanka, we see political leaders causing more destruction and devastation to Mother Earth.

On April 9, Daily Mirror reported that for a long time, accusations have been made against Urban Development and Housing Minister Prasanna Ranatunga, alleging that he forcibly acquired a plot of state-owned land in the Thalawathugoda area and also conducted reclamation and development activities there. The Minister's daughter resides in a house on a land adjacent to Perera Mawatha in Thalawathugoda where the Minister's house is located. There is no access to that house directly from Perera Mawatha, hence, one must use the road close to the Thalawathugoda tank to reach it. A protected canal separates the Minister's daughter's land from the Minister's land at the end of that road. It is alleged that Minister Ranatunga is attempting to fill the canal, construct a road to connect the two houses and provide access to both properties from these roads. However, the Minister has denied the allegation claiming they are baseless and malicious. But, the UDA admits leasing state land to the Minister's wife.

Two environmental journalists, Manal Aman and Lili Iannella, have said that Mother Earth has been talking to us ever since her beginning. She smiles through sunshine, cries through rainfall and screams through storms. And now, more than ever, paying attention to the many moods of the earth is crucial, as we face climate change and detrimental weather events that place people at risk. Life as we know it depends on the health of the planet.



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TO PROTECT THE WELFARE OF SRI LANKAN MIGRANT WORKERS, HOLD RECRUITMENT AGENCIES ACCOUNTABLE

By
A. Nileshe Fernando

The 2022 Football World Cup in Qatar centered the world's attention on the abuse faced by thousands of primarily South Asian migrant construction workers. The spectacle was a rare opportunity to press the case for reform not just in Qatar, but across many Gulf-region governments whose glittering skylines conceal a staggering amount of migrant abuse. Yet, just as the fervour of fair weather football fans has waned, so too have international outrage and promises of reform.

Many Sri Lankans migrate to the Gulf region because work opportunities at home simply do not compare. Study after study has documented the tremendous wage gains that migrant workers experience across borders. However, it is also well understood that these riches come at a price and migrant stories of abuse are common knowledge. Wages and passports are routinely withheld by employers, migrants are forced to work long, uncompensated hours in the desert sun, and many are subjected to physical, verbal and sexual abuse with few options for legal recourse.

Prior investigative reporting has documented the severity of abuse faced by Sri Lankan migrants in this region. However, detractors will often retort that this reporting is sensationalized and, instead, reflects a few 'bad apples' and intrinsically hazardous work. To paint a more complete picture of the abuse faced by migrants, over the last eight years, I've worked with a team of researchers at the University of Notre Dame and Verité Research.

With the support of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), we analyzed data on 1.4 million Sri Lankan migrants over a decade—85% of whom sought work in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait. Migrant workers and their families can make complaints about abuse and employer malpractice more generally to Sri Lankan consulates, giving us a useful proxy for their experiences in the Gulf.

You may think, as we did, that a report to a consulate is a high bar that may miss out on less severe abuse. Even so, 8.5% of migrants made complaints to Sri Lankan consulates between 2005 and 2015. As we document, the abuse is widespread—and female domestic workers are especially vulnerable.

While construction workers account for 1 in 5 of migrants during this period, they account for just 9% of the roughly 120,000 complaints made (a complaint rate of 3.8%). In contrast, female domestic workers account for approximately 50% of all migrants to the Gulf region but 75% of all complaints. This amounts to over 1 in 10 female domestic workers making a complaint to a consulate (a complaint rate

of 12.8%). While roughly 40% of these complaints relate to contractual breach and non-payment of wages, 16% are reports of harassment, sexual and physical abuse. Our findings are largely consistent with prior investigative reporting and ethnographic research. The especially grave circumstances of female domestic workers across the Gulf region is unsurprising. They often find themselves at the mercy of employers who, by virtue of sponsoring their visas, have immense power over their lives. Reforms to the kafala visa system in the UAE have shown promising results, but too often these reforms are poorly enforced or explicitly exclude domestic workers.

MIGRATION RESTRICTIONS AS A POLICY TO ADDRESS ABUSE

Two years after the controversial execution of 19-year old Rizana Nafeek, a Sri Lankan domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, the Sri Lankan government instituted the Family Background Report (FBR) policy. The policy imposed age-based restrictions on women and mothers with young children intending to migrate to the Gulf for domestic work.

The Sri Lankan government isn't alone in responding to domestic political pressures by restricting migration; the governments of Nepal, Indonesia, and the Philippines have imposed similar restrictions in recent years. However, these restrictions often yield consequences that undermine their intent. Preliminary findings suggest the FBR policy had unintended effects on fertility and worsened the educational outcomes of children whose mothers have been bed from migration—a key rationale for the policy.

Sri Lankan migrants are willing to alter their fertility decisions to circumvent restrictions because these labor market opportunities are enormously consequential to their own fortunes and those of their families. Consequently, migration restrictions may inadvertently encourage flows through unsafe channels and raise the risk of trafficking. Furthermore, in economies where remittances play an important role in macroeconomic stability, these restrictions are a severe misstep; a point that was, presumably, belatedly

recognized when the demands of the FBR policy were relaxed after the recent financial crisis.

ANOTHER WAY: REGULATORY POLICY AND MIGRATION INTERMEDIARIES

Rather than sweeping migration restrictions, a nascent literature suggests that an agency ratings system created by the welfare of migrants in the Gulf is to alter the incentives of intermediaries. Migration intermediaries, often referred to as recruitment (or "manpower") agencies, assist migrants with the bureaucracy surrounding travel (passports, visas, etc.) and match migrants to employers abroad. When they operate with limited oversight, they have little reason to care about the quality of employers with whom they do business.

In a new research paper, we found that an agency ratings system created by the welfare of migrants in the Gulf is to alter the incentives of intermediaries. Migration intermediaries, often referred to as recruitment (or "manpower") agencies, assist migrants with the bureaucracy surrounding travel (passports, visas, etc.) and match migrants to employers abroad. When they operate with limited oversight, they have little reason to care about the quality of employers with whom they do business.

We estimate that this programme costs roughly LKR 15 million but generated almost LKR 3 billion (USD 10 million) over a five-year period through increased remittance flows. Similarly, another recent paper shows that providing migrants with information on the quality of recruiters in Indonesia can improve the quality of jobs at which they are placed.

TOWARDS DEVELOPING EVIDENCE-BASED MIGRATION POLICY

The Sri Lankan government needn't rely solely on the goodwill of their wealthy counterparts in the Gulf. They can make migration safer by improving the transparency of the risks and rewards that potential migrants may face abroad and by rewarding (or punishing) recruitment agencies who excel (or err) in their promised services. The government is sitting on a wealth of data on migration: where else do the various forms to embark, disembark or even apply for a visa end up? A crucial ingredient in developing robust, evidence-based policy on migration is that the Sri Lankan government, and its expansive bureaucracy, embrace data-transparency and are willing to partner with researchers and civil society.

(Nileshe Fernando is a global academic network member at Verité Research and an assistant professor, Department of Economics at University of Notre Dame)

No 8, Hunupitiya Cross Road, Colombo 2, P.O. Box 1136, Colombo.
Editorial: Tel: 011 2 436 988, 011 2 479 479 (ext.327/356), Fax: 011 2 304 545
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E-mail: dmnews@dailymirror.wnl.lk

DM Poll

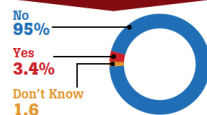
In the backdrop where a great debate has been started on whether the Presidential or General Elections should be held first or both together, where do you stand in this debate as citizens?



1. Presidential poll first
2. Parliamentary Election first
3. Both together

LAST POLL

In a landmark judgment last week, the Supreme Court took over valuable Colombo-7 Pujer Road residences continued to occupy by ex-President Maithripala Sirisena. Do you think former Presidents should be awarded much luxuries like houses, vehicles, servants and securities at the expense of public?



See web poll at www.DailyMirror.lk

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Duty-free vehicles for elections?

The Daily Mirror, on Tuesday (16), reported that a group of MPs from both the ruling party and opposition—who always unite for gains and benefits—are requesting for lower priced duty-free vehicle permits, claiming that a lack of vehicles for electioneering during the forthcoming elections would pose a significant challenge for them.

Further, they have emphasized that many new MPs do not possess any vehicle, which is a severe drawback to continue their political activities. One wonders, how they managed to contest Parliamentary Elections without vehicles!

Put shortly, it is well-known how political parties utilize state vehicles, which are at their beck and call during most elections, in addition to scores of private vehicles provided by businessmen. Considering all of the above, one is at a loss to understand as to why such flimsy and fictitious claims are being made—not unusual either—in the guise of elections to fulfill their insatiable craving and greed to obtain whatever perks and privileges being left out so far! The worse, they have completely ignored the fact that not only is Sri Lanka now deep in debt, but the majority of citizens are fighting tooth and nail for mere survival, as well.

That said, day in, day out most citizens are more or less outcast, disgusted and disappointed by political rhetoric and reactions of Ministers and government politicians who all seem to be living in a different world, fiddling, swindling and living luxuriously fortifying their quest for power and wealth. Worst of all, they are enjoying all these on the hard-pressed sacrifices made by the innocent citizens of this blessed island! Well, the President and government party leaders are aware that their vote bases are quite wobbly and weak and on thin ice, to say the least. MPs know it too and are now trying to extract maximum benefits from their political leaders, knowing very well that their bosses depend on them to deliver the goods. As such, they are also aware that powers that be would go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that every need of their takes precedence above all else, during pre-elections, come what may! On the other hand, certain sitting MPs from both sides of the divide are quite jittery as they know that their political destiny too will be put into test either in 2024 or 2025.

As for President Ranil Wickremesinghe, it is sine qua non to comprehend the pulse of the citizens and look beyond the request for duty-free permits, and ease whatever possible burdens already heaped on the citizenry. Sooner it is done, the better.

MR. Pathirage
Kolonnawa

Keheliya's official vehicles not handed over yet?

WEB COMMENTS

JOHAN - As long as his friends are in govt. and Parliament, his family members will enjoy all privileges on tax payers' money.

JUSTICE - Unfortunately, he is innocent until proven guilty. Thus, his family is entitled to all the privileges until he is

guilty and sentenced. LAL FERNANDO - Well, this is what is happening to the innocent, hard working tax payers' money.

JOE - This could be the second most crooked family after the Rajapakses.

See more web comments at www.DailyMirror.lk



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