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ASIAN LABOR EMIGRATION TO THE ARAB OPEC STATES

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I. Introduction

This paper has been prepared because: (1) some of the Asia A.I.D. missions are concerned that the objectives of AID's programs and of the general development effort in several Asian LDCs are being threatened by the export of their technically skilled to meet the demand of the migrant labor markets in the Arab OPEC states; and (2) recent studies of these markets which tend to corroborate these concerns by finding that the Asian percentage of the total labor supply has significantly increased during the 1970s and will continue to increase in the future with more Asian LDCs becoming preferred sources of unskilled and skilled labor for these markets.

The focal point for the analysis of the migrant labor markets in the Middle East has been the ongoing International Migration Project, a study commissioned by the International Labor Office as part of its World Employment Program. The papers produced so far under this project are, however, principally concerned with analyzing the demand markets and their effects on the employment and economies of the OPEC states. They contain very little data regarding market supply and nothing of the impact that this supply has had on the Asian countries of supply. In general, information on Asia as a prime supplier for the market is sparse and highly suspect. Fortunately, generally well prepared descriptions and analyses of official migration policies, migrant recruiting procedures, and handling of remittances is available for the majority of AID's program countries in Asia as a result of UNCTAD sponsored country studies which were done in 1977 on the general subject of the brain drain problem.

This paper treats not only the two primary matters of interest, i.e., migrant flows and cash remittances, but, in addition, the policy and procedural setting in which labor flows and remittances take place. A basic understanding of this setting is needed to develop an understanding of the major issues involved.

The paper is a primer on this complex subject of increasing importance to A.I.D. It makes tentative conclusions that should be tested as more data and analysis become available through additional papers under the ILO project, and through studies by the World Bank (discussed herein) and others.

Emigration Policies

Labor Export Controls - are nearly always of an indirect nature. Direct measures, such as quotas limiting the emigration of certain types of skilled and professional labor, have proven to be largely unenforceable when enacted. Pakistan enacted an emigration ordinance a few year s ago to control labor flows but this raised so much opposition it was repealed after one month. In addition, such measures are recognized as indefensible by many of the Asian countries because of the countries' inability to provide domestic employment for many of the annual new entrants into the labor market in the face of rising unemployment and underemployment rates.

Indirect measures, in the form of incentives to keep certain skills at home, are sometimes offered to those with skills which governments regard as being in short supply for either current or future needs. Scientific personnel in India and the Philippines have been singled out for such special treatment. Scientists in both countries have been the beneficiaries of an increase in the number of research fellowships, salary increases and new research equipment and facilities. Scientists who have gone abroad are enticed back by guarantees of temporary government-sponsored employment until they can find something permanent.

The principal inducement for emigrating is the larger income to be earned abroad. The difference between the income earned abroad and at home is generally too large for any program of indirect incentives to counter significantly. It is not considered practical for a country to try to remove this inducement by raising salaries to be competitive with those in the Middle-East labor market. Such action for the technically skilled and professionally qualified would further skew income distribution and would likely lead to hard-to-resist demands from other segments of the labor force for salary raises that would, in turn, fuel inflation and result in increasing unemployment.

Direct regulatory measures attempted include setting minimum periods of domestic services for newly graduated professionals, a ban on the prospective labor importing country holding qualifying professional exams in the country, and bonding of emigrants which commits them to a period of domestic service after service abroad or financial compensation if they do not return. Most of the Asian countries have prescribed minimum periods of domestic service for newly graduated professionals, particularly doctors. Both the Philippines and India have refused to permit the U.S. medical certification examination in their countries, thus making it more difficult for their doctors to qualify for openings in U.S. hospitals. However, most professionals are usually members of their country's elite and, as such, have the economic and political power to get around these and other similar controls.

The Philippines has probably had more success in limiting emigration by controlling one of the sources of the problem, i.e., surplus university graduates. This it has done by instituting the National College Extrance Examination in 1974 for the avowed purpose of curbing college enrollment and re-directing many of the would-be enrollees to vocational training. Other countries, such as Sri Lanka, would do well to reduce the problem of surplus university graduates by restructuring their educational systems to produce skills which are more relevant to their development needs and not in large demand abroad. For example, paramedically trained staff are probably more appropriate for rural integrated health systems dealing with health problems whose origins lie in poverty than are highly qualified medical professionals who are heavily in demand in the international labor market.

Labor export brokers - are the conduits supplying the skills demanded by the Arab OPEC states and other foreign labor markets. Private recruitment agencies abound in all the South Asian states and are increasing in number in East Asia. They handle the bulk of the labor trade and are run by indigenous personnel either legally through a license obtained from the Ministry of Labor or its equivalent, or illegally operated; these agencies are highly profitable operations receiving sizeable fees from the labor importer and emigrant client alike. The fee gouging and outright swindles committed by some private agencies have in recent years led some governments, Pakistan and the Philippines being cases in point, to intervene in the labor trade by tightening up on licensing and even establishing government-run brokerage agencies to compete with the private agencies. Another factor promoting increasing Asian government interest in the trade, one that can be directly traced to the rapid growth in the lucrative Arab OPEC states market, has been the exporting governments desire to gain a larger portion of this market for themselves and, thereby, assure the maximum return from their export of labor in the form of foreign exchange cash remittances.

Such agencies as the Philippines Overseas Employment Development Board, Pakistan's Overseas Employment Corporation and the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower and Development conclude agreements directly with foreign firms and governments for the supply of manpower and generally try to coordinate their country's overall labor supply to meet the changing occupational needs of the Arab market. Some of these government agencies, and, indeed, some agencies in the private sector as well, mount training programs to meet market demands for specific skills which are not readily available in their country. In direct response to the demands of the Arab markets, the Bangladesh Government has established training programs which can now train 2,500 annually in various trades.

In general, however, governments are only just beginning their attempts at organizing and directing their countries responses to the demands of the Arab and other international labor markets. No Asian country has a comprehensive labor export policy which encompasses foreign market demand projections and local supply, brain drain concerns and utilization of cash remittances. National manpower planning, in which emigrant projec tions should be factored, is unreliable or non-existent.

<u>Labor export motivation</u> - in Asia is determined by the desire for greater levels of cash remittances to relieve balance of payments pressures and as a safety valve applied to high unemployment and underemployment rates at home.

As the following table indicates, cash remittances from the Middle East play a significant role in bettering the Korean, Pakistani and Indian balance of payments. Pakistani remittances underwent a 55% annual growth rate between 1973 and 1977, and 82% of the total amount remitted has been from Pakistani labor in the Arab OPEC states. Similarly, Indian labor in these states has primarily accounted for the tremendous increase in remittances to that country to the point that remittances made up the Indian current account deficit in 1977.

<u>Table I</u> [1/]

<u>Cash Remittances From the Arab OPEC States</u>

($ Millions)

	Year	Amount	Year	Amount
Bangladesh	1976	20	1978	113
India	1973	235	1978	1,600
Korea	—	—	1978	2,000
Pakistan	1973	138	1978	1,200
Philippines	1974	104	1978	200
Sri Lanka	1975	7	1978	14

1/ <u>SOURCES</u>: <u>IMF Survey</u>, September 4, 1978; various IBRD reports; Country Statistical Reports

Unemployment/underemployment rates in Asia, as indicated below, provide a policy justification for encouraging the unrestricted outflow of labor although these factors seem to be of less significance as determinants of labor export policy than the exporting countries desire for larger remittances. Whereas the underemployment rates should be of more concern than unemployment rates to most Asian countries, in Sri Lanka the country's very high (20%) unemployment rate is probably a major factor upholding that country's presently unrestricted export of professional, skilled and unskilled labor. By exporting its labor surplus a country rids itself, at least temporarily, of a potentially significant force for political instability at home, and stands to gain from this group by their remittances, and, for those who ultimately do return home, the acquisition of new job skills learned abroad which may increase their value to the home labor market.

Table II[2/]

	Unemployment (% of workforce)	Underemployment (% of workforce)
Bangladesh	40.0	(Combined unemployment/underemployment)
India	4.4	8.2
Indonesia	8.8	40.0
Pakistan	2.0	25.9
Philippines	7.5	15.0
Sri Lanka	20.0	-
Thailand	.4	18.3

2/ SOURCES: (1) A.I.D. Occasional Paper: Unemployment and Underemployment in the rural sector of the LDCS, January 1977

(2) IBRD reports

III. Labor Flows

The statistical data that one needs to determine the nature and size of labor flows from and back to the labor exporting countries of Asia and to the labor importing Arab OPEC states is sparse, outdated, incomplete and often conflicting. Nevertheless, that the flows have increased significantly during the 1970s is evident from the precipitous rise in remittances from the Arab states to the South Asia countries and the less dramatic, but still evident, increases in remittances elsewhere in Asia.

One source reporting in the second quarter of 1979 estimated that between 300 and 500,000 skilled and unskilled Indians are working in the OPEC states, mostly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A significant number of Indian planning experts, agricultural advisors and university professors are reported to be working in Iraq, along with a much larger number of clerks and laborers. In 1977 it was estimated that Indian doctors, engineers and scientists working abroad represented respectively 10, 8 and 4% of the country's supply of these professions -- not a large claim. Saudi Arabia has not been a significant market for Indian manpower, preferring instead the more culturally and politically akin Pakistanis. In the case of Pakistan, estimates are that over 80% of the estimated 800 thousand Pakistani workers working abroad work in the OPEC states. There are reports that other Arab states are looking increasingly askance at both Pakistani and Indian labor for reasons as varied as their supposed greater susceptibility to leftist influences and because they repatriate almost all their earnings rather than spending some on the Arab states goods and services.

The export of professionals from Asian LDCs to the Middle East and other foreign labor markets shows, in the case of the Philippines, an annual flow of 21% of the average annual increase in Filipino doctors, and 11% of the increases for Filipino engineers and scientists. About 50 to 70% of the annual output of doctors in Pakistan are believed to be emigrating abroad. In India, the estimate is 25% and 30% respectively for engineers and doctors. In Sri Lanka, statistics for the period 1971-1975 show a 35% outflow of the largest group, accountants, followed by 20% for doctors and 18% engineers. Reduced demand from previously assured labor markets in Iran, Uganda and the UAE is reported to have reduced net Bangladeshi emigration in 1978 although 6,400 workers had emigrated (most of them to the OPEC states) during the first four months of 1979 in a broad range of professional, skilled and semi-skilled occupations.

Bangladesh's officially pursued manpower export program has been under attack by Bangladeshi and aid donors alike for stripping the country of professional and skilled labor needed for its development program. The remittance benefits vs. opportunity costs of this program are currently being studied by the World Bank which has, in collaboration with the BDG, recently completed a household survey of emigrant returnees and families of emigrants still working abroad. This report should be available early in 1980.

According to recent data published by the Sri Lanka Department of Labor for the period 1976-1978, the largest manpower category exported to the OPEC states by government brokers were those classified as skilled/trained manpower -- 77.1% of the total (4,492 individuals) via this route. On the other hand, private labor brokers emphasized the unskilled -- 51.2% of the total (9,749 individuals) sent by private agencies. Thus the numbers of emigrants brokered by the private agencies were more than double those handled by the government. In the high level manpower category, accountants were the largest number exported by both private and official agencies, followed by engineers -- 113 and 84 respectively for the three year period. In the medium manpower range, foremen and technicians (not otherwise identified) placed first and second in number exported -- 229 and 199 respectively betwen 1976 and 1978. It isn't known what percentage of the total Sri Lanka supply of these jobs in these years are represented by these figures. Comparative salary scales for a range of occupations from doctors to laborers indicate that the OPEC states salaries are roughly five times greater than Sri Lankan salaries for these same occupations. Similar salary gaps can be assumed to exist in nearly all the other South and East Asian supply countries with the possible exceptions of Korea and Taiwan.

Korean labor in the OPEC states has grown since 1974 to the point where it is estimated that more than half of Korea's entire emigrant labor force, or about 50,000 mostly construction workers, are working in one OPEC state, Saudi Arabia. These workers are employed by Korean construction firms whose foreign exchange earnings have been of even greater importance to the Korean economy than remittances. 81% of the $15 billion value of Korean overseas construction contracts in 1978 was from contracts with the Arab OPEC states. The net receipts from these contracts were equivalent more than 56% of Korea's 1978 trade deficit and were a major factor moderating the size of the current account balance that year.

Two scholars of the emigrant labor phenomenon in the Middle East predict a greater future dependence by the Arab OPEC states on labor from East Asia. 3/ It is their view that: (1) the development programs in the OPEC states will continue their already significant growth since the mid-1970s with their increasing oil revenues; (2) the oil poor, labor surplus Arab states have reached the limits of their labor supply capability; and (3) government interventions in South Asia because of private broker excesses and their concern over the amount of certain skills already exported will cause shortages in these previously major sources of Asian supply. Therefore, in their view, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan and Malaysia will become, like Korea before them, preferred supply sources. They believe that this preference will be assured if the OPEC states can obtain the labor they want through the prime contractor mode popularized by the Koreans instead of the individual fixed term contract. Under this mode the contractor provides the administration and infrastructure to maintain his workers in an enclave arrangement which provides cost savings to the OPEC state, but, probably of greater importance to these states, also effectively isolates these workers with their alien cultures and beliefs from the indigenous population and provides greater assurance than the individual contract that the worker will leave the country when his job is done.

3/ Birks and Sinclair, Aspects of International Labor Migration in the Arab Near East, May 1979

The current reported difficulties being experienced by individually contracted Indian and Pakistani workers in getting visas to work in some of the OPEC states lends credence to these preferred mode predictions. The fact that, with the possible exception of Taiwan and Korea, wage scales in the East Asian countries are not likely to become competitive over the next several years with those being offered by the OPEC states is another reason for seeing validity in these predictions. The clincher is the attraction that potentially large foreign exchange remittances have for these Asian governments, most of whom are beset with increasing balance of payments problems, due in no small part to the rising prices of oil products from the remittance paying Arab OPEC states.

If the development programs of the OPEC states continue to grow at the pace of recent years, as predicted, there would seem to be a continuing future demand for about the same numbers of both unskilled and skilled foreign labor. There is no likelihood that, under this growth assumption, the indigenous unskilled labor force will replace foreign unskilled labor to continue accelerated large-scale infrastructure and other construction projects. There are insufficient indigenous numbers for replacement. By way of illustrating this point, in Bahrain, Indian and Pakistani workers make up about 75% of the total work force, and, in Kuwait, the non-Kuwaiti (mostly Indians and Pakistani) share of the work force in 1975 was reported in excess of 71% -- it is probably more now.

There may be a likelihood of replacement in certain skills since all of the OPEC states have training programs at home and abroad to train their own engineers, doctors and other high level technicians. Whether, or to what extent, the numbers in these training programs are planned to mesh with the operation of new infrastructure and other facilities requiring technically skilled staff is not known. A World Bank study of future demand projections for migrant labor in the Middle East is nearing completion and will hopefully provide more empirically derived insights into the size and composition of this future labor market than is currently available. This study will be valuable for the supply side of the equation since its projections for an estimated eight job categories will identify, at least by region, the probable sources of supply.

IV. Remittances Utilization

As noted earlier, the desire for cash remittances appears to be the primary motivation behind government support for labor export from Asia to the Arab OPEC states. That these remittances can make a significant impact on a country's balance of payments has been demonstrated in the cases of India and Pakistan.

The earlier quoted total remittances to some Asian countries are, however, only those which have passed through the national banking system, post offices, under the terms of government assisted emigrant contracts, or through other official controls. There are, in addition to these officially recorded sums, significant amounts of cash remittances which enter the countries through unofficial and illegal channels and do not get entered into the national foreign exchange account. The incentive for using illegal transactions to remit is great because these generally offer higher conversion rates than the official means of remittance. In some countries in Asia the size of the unofficial remittance is believed to be even greater than the official but no one can say for certain since no records are kept of the unofficial. The lack of control over unofficial remittances is being used as a major argument by some Asian governments for replacing private labor brokerage agencies with government agencies which would require a monthly remittance under the terms of individual contracts, or for channeling all labor exports through government sanctioned prime contractors.

Asian governments are, however, not very successful in controlling the utilization of officially recorded cash remittances.

Emigrants bring with them on their return, or send ahead of their return as gifts, depending on the import regulations of their country, merchandise (as opposed to cash) remittances. These are generally in the form of personal luxury items, e.g., cars and household appliances. Probably a large percentage of the cash remittances is also being spent on similar personal consumption items, in addition to other primary cash remittance uses such as land, housing and social ceremonies. Economic planners concerned with projecting domestic resources mobilization for the next long range national development plan are eager to convert private cash remittances into aggregated funds which can be used for purposes consistent with national plans. However, except probably for the utilization of those remittances that come in the form of taxes and very little data is available on these, no country in Asia has produced effective policies and programs which divert cash remittances to more economically productive uses.

V. Conclusions and Issues for A.I.D.

Restrictions on Labor Export

The Asian LDCs are going to maintain the priority of obtaining larger cash remittances from the Arab OPEC stats over their concerns that this priority could exacerbate their brain drain problem and hinder their own development effort. Government leaders in several of these countries have said as much already and there is no basis for believing that the leadership in the other countries will reach any different position. While the remittance resource is not all that dependable over time, e.g., Turkey's remittances dropped 83% from a high in 1974 when they paid for one third of Turkey's total imports to a relatively insignificant level in 1977, the risks are not likely to be a deterent. On the contrary, Pakistan is understood to be mounting a major effort to recoup its share of the market in some OPEC states where its share has slipped recently.

It is unlikely that most of the Asian LDCs will be willing to enact new measures for the purpose of directly limiting the numbers of emigrants in the various semi-skilled and skilled job categories. First, there is the experience of largely ineffective enforcement of measures already enacted. In addition, the spectre of rising unemployment and underemployment rates is always present as an effective argument against restrictions. There are other reasons arguing against restricions. One of these is based on the view of migrant labor flows as a natural response to market demands. Labor emigration is not a new phenomenon. Labor has traditionally sought those countries whose relative economic growth rates offer greater economic opportunities than can be found at home. This is what happened in the 1960s in West

Germany and France where economic growth exceeded the availability of the indigenous labor supply, particularly the unskilled and semi-skilled, and large numbers of Turk, Greek, Italian and Arab North African workers flocked to these markets. As growth has slowed in these countries these workers have tended to return to their homelands, in many cases with newly acquired skills. Added to these arguments is that of human rights, i.e., whether preventing an individual from emigrating to a foreign environment that affords him more economic opportunity than his own country would deny him one of his basic rights. A persuasive argument can be made in this case and is sufficient reason for A.I.D.'s not encouraging restrictions on labor export.

Regarding indirect governmental measures to keep people from emigrating, these are not likely to be regarded with any more favor than direct measures since they involve programs of costly incentives, including higher wages, which the Asian governments can not afford on the scale required if these programs are to significantly deter emigration.

One way in which A.I.D. could help with shortages in the engineering, medical and nursing professions would be for A.I.D. to take a more direct role in training only paraprofessionals in these fields through its own project training components, and by direct involvement in helping a country reorient, in a like manner, its formal education system. The assumption is that the paraprofesionally trained are better able to meet Asia's BHN service needs, and, in addition, will continue to have little attraction for the Middle East and other international labor markets.

Government Interventions in Labor Export and Cash Remittances

The Asian governments interventions in labor flows will most likely take the form of creating or strengthening official labor brokerage agencies to replace private agencies altogether, or by making the latter entirely subject to official emigrant policies and regulations whose common underlying purpose is to increase emigrant flows in order to increase cash remittances.

Interventions with respect to cash remittances are likely to mean renewed efforts to alter the pattern of essentially personal consumption uses to more productive uses in line with national economic development plans. Governments may try to increase their control of remittance uses by publicizing more economic investment opportunities at home and providing investment incentives by: (1) more favorable credit rates than are available from commercial banks for approved investments; (2) property tax exemption holidays for approved construction; and (3) buying foreign exchange at above the official rate, if its use is then linked to approved investments. A.I.D. might very well provide technical assistance to assist with drawing up an incentives program for channeling more remittances into productive investments.

Another means for extending control over remittances is through higher tax rates on income earned abroad. Measures of this type will probably just divert more remittances from official to unofficial channels, thereby reducing the amount of remittances which can be officially accounted for and which might be put to more productive uses. A.I.D. should discourage higher rates of income tax.

Comprehensive Labor Export Plans

It is doubtful that Asian governments are willing to devote the time and effort that some of their own countrymen, as well as certain aid donors, are urging upon them to design a comprehensive labor export plan which will somehow balance the benefits obtained from remittances against their costs to the country's own development by the unplanned movement from the country of increasing numbers of its skilled manpower for extended periods of time, or, perhaps, permanently. It will be interesting to see what emigrant and remittance policy recommendations come from the in-process World Bank Study on the benefits and costs of emigration to Bangladesh and Pakistan, and, more than this, the extent to which these governments adopt the Bank's recommendations.

Emigration and A.I.D. Programming

Asia A.I.D. missions which face the likelihood of a shortage of country personnel for prospective A.I.D. projects have several options open tothem. The most obvious and perhaps least desirable of these options is to scrap the project altogether. A second option would be to postpone the project until the country can supply its own personnel. Another way out of the dilemma would be to substitute U.S. direct hire or contract personnel on a one-to-one basis for the unavailable host country personnel. This is not a viable alternative, particularly for those projects with large planning and supervisory personnel requirements such as the irrigation projects which figure so prominently in A.I.D.'s current and prospective project portfolios. Mission mode ceilings and the generalpolicy outlook for further overall agency staff reductions cast further doubts on this option.

A more viable option carried out in conjunction with each project's design and implementation would be a major effort at on-the-job training under the auspices of the U.S. direct hire and contract professionals and skilled technicians. This would be in addition tothe longer term attack on the shortage problem mentioned earlier: A.I.D. in conjunction with other donors should take a more direct role in helping the Asian LDCs reorient their educational systems to produce skills more appropriate to their development needs and less attractive to the international labor market. A fifth option might be possible. For those projects where A.I.D. is co-financing with the World Bank and the Asian Develoment Bank A.I.D. might put up the financing for these MDBs to hire U.S. technicians as replacements for country personnel, assuming that MDB policies would permit this. A.I.D. might also fund similar arrangements between the skills-short Asian LDC and another Asian LDC with a surplus of the desired skills; in this way, the A.I.D. project would be assured of its staffing needs for the life-of-the-project and these skills would not risk being lost to the region through emigration to the Middle East or to other international labor markets.

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