



Migrant workers dramatize the issues they face while working abroad. Taipei, Taiwan.

REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2004

Synthesized by Rex Varona based on country reports published in this volume and additional information monitored by AMC and MFA during the period.

Regional Economic and Political Situation

The year 2004 opened with noticeable optimism as the immediate threats and uncertainties of previous years, such as the US invasion of Iraq, geopolitical tensions among the world powers, the SARS epidemic, and debt, financial and currency crises continued to recede.

Anticipating a turnaround in the regional and global economic and security outlook, Asian countries geared up and positioned themselves to take early advantage of the expected economic upturn. Most Asian countries

targeted significantly higher economic growth in 2004, as they sought to offset the depression, recession or slow growth experienced in previous years. In August 2004, the IMF affirmed the brighter economic outlook when it projected a 4.6% world economic growth for 2004, up from a 4.0% projection in April 2004.¹

Hopes for the future, however, were dimmed by the persistent rise in world oil prices. In August 2004, oil prices reached a 21-year high, raising fears it would breach the psychologically important level of USD50 a barrel. Oil prices reached a new high of USD53 in October, and continued to rise. This upward trend is due to fears over supply on one hand, and the fierce appetite for oil, particularly by the US and China, on the other hand. Geopolitical moves and the US President Bush's "War on Terror" have imposed US dominance over oil, military and nuclear capabilities in the world, creating tensions or outright aggression on leading oil producing countries like Iraq, Iran, the Middle East in general, Venezuela and Ecuador.

Meanwhile, China remained the primary engine of rapid economic growth in Asia. In early March 2004, the government announced a 7% GDP growth target for

2004. In an effort to tame breakneck economic growth and control its ballooning USD36.8 billion deficit (2% of GDP), Premier Wen Jiabao reiterated government plans to curb infrastructure spending and stimulus measures introduced in the past; instead, the government will boost support for the rural areas. The Premier vowed slower but more balanced and sustainable economic growth. He also announced the adoption of a “People First Policy” which will give priority to job creation, rural reforms, and bank reforms. The government reported that urban residents earn more than three times the farmers/rural population.² This imbalance has created massive rural-urban labour migration especially to the booming coastal urban centres; government estimates that there are over 130 million “floating population”, which is creating alarming migration, health (including SARS and HIV/AIDS), labor and social concerns for the authorities. The government shift in emphasis to rural populations is aimed at curbing this massive urban-rural migration and potential rural unrest.

2004 was a politically sensitive year as several Asian countries held general elections or experienced changes in the top government positions. In almost all of these, the promotion of migrants’ rights hardly figured as a key election issue; therefore, no major shifts in migration policies of these countries are expected.

In Malaysia, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad stepped down after 22 years in office. His deputy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, took over in October 2003. General elections were held in March 2004 after Badawi dissolved parliament, and Badawi was elected Prime Minister by a landslide. Indonesia held both parliamentary elections and presidential elections in 2004, with parliamentary elections held in April, and presidential elections in July. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was finally confirmed as President in October, after Megawati accepted defeat.³ Presidential, congressional, senatorial and local elections were held in the Philippines in May 2004; President Gloria M. Arroyo and her party won. This was the first time that Filipinos overseas were able to vote, under the new Absentee Voting Law. In Cambodia, general elections in July resulted in a mixed victory for Hun Sen. Although he gained a majority, for 11 months the government was paralyzed by a political deadlock with the runner-up, Funcinpec. The impasse wasn’t resolved until July 2004, when Hun Sen formed a coalition with Funcinpec and the government was finally sworn in.

In China, President Jiang Zemin stepped down after 10 years in office, although he maintained his position as army chief of the Central Military Commission. His successor, Hu Jintao, had already been named head of the Communist Party in November 2002, and was elected President by the National People’s Congress in March 2003. On 8 March, the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s 3,000-strong parliament, opened its 10-day Annual Session. The 10th NPC amended the Constitution for the first time ever. One of the amendments mentioned “human rights” for the first time. Hong Kong’s Democratic Party leader Martin Lee, however, criticized the move as “largely symbolic”; critics say this amendment will hardly result in immediate or significant improvement in freedoms of the people. For example, freedom of assembly is already enshrined in the constitution, but is not implemented. Another historic change was the repeal of the ban on private property ownership.⁴ The NPC also focused on narrowing the gap between the new middle class and the poor, and opposing Taiwan independence.⁵

Regardless, Taiwan held close elections in March 2004. With 6,471,970 votes, Chen won 11% more of the popular vote than in his 2000 victory; nonetheless, this gave him a mere 0.2% margin, or 29,518 votes. Meanwhile, legislative council elections were held in Hong Kong, although blunders marred the elections.⁶ Roh Moo-hyun, a member of the majority Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), became South Korea’s President in February 2003. His presidency was marred, however, by the March 12, 2004 impeachment of President Roh by the National Assembly. Despite this move, Roh was reinstated as president when Korea’s Constitutional Court rejected the impeachment on May 14, 2004.

In Sri Lanka, parliamentary elections were held in April, three years ahead of schedule and the third time in four years. Earlier in February, President Kumaratunga dissolved parliament after accusing PM Wickremesinghe of giving up too many concessions to the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and jeopardizing national security. In the past 11 years, 13 elections (including local elections) have been held.⁷

In the Middle East, elections were held in Kuwait and Oman. The first parliamentary elections since the 1990s were held in Kuwait in June 2003, although only around 15% of the country’s citizens were eligible to vote. Moreover, it was estimated that only 40% of this eligible group actually cast their votes. Shortly after the



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On International Migrants' Day, migrant advocates call for universal ratification of the UN Migrant Workers Convention.

International migrants' rights standards, instruments, and channels

Migrant advocates, including the Asian Migrant Centre (AMC), Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) and Migrants Rights' International (MRI), celebrated the first year of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (MWC) as an international treaty. As prescribed by the MWC, the United Nations created the "Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families" (MWC Treaty Body) on 11 December 2003. The MWC Treaty Body is tasked with examining reports (every 5 years for States Parties; it can also ask for supplementary reports from other concerned bodies, e.g. NGOs) on the compliance by State parties to the MWC; it also submits annual reports to the UN General Assembly. The MWC Treaty Body, together with the CEDAW Committee, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Migrant Workers, the Special Rapporteur on Women, and the UN Commission on Human Rights are some of the key UN channels used by migrants' rights advocates such as AMC and MFA in reporting and raising Asian migrants' issues.

Of the 10-person MWC Treaty Body, at least one member is from Asia (the Philippines). AMC, MFA and MRI started groundwork in 2004 to ensure that migrant advocates can best use the MWC as channel to report on violations/issues, and promote migrants' rights.

The July 2003 entry into force of the MWC was a landmark policy breakthrough. It took more than 13 years for the treaty to take effect because of the resistance by many host and home country governments in binding themselves to international legal obligations in protecting migrants' rights (See Regional Overview in *AMY2002-2003* for detailed discussion). The treaty is legally binding on ratifying countries only; because of the limited ratification (only 27 out of 191 countries by the end of 2004) the power of the treaty is limited. It is nevertheless a symbolic and normative standard for non-ratifying countries. Thus, advocates consider the MWC a strategic victory because there is now an international law that defines minimum human rights standards for migrant workers. Advocates can refer to these standards in advocating for changes in national migration policies and practices, and in reporting violations of migrants' rights – regardless of whether the country has ratified or not. For those countries that have ratified the MWC,

elections, the Crown Prince gave the role of Prime Minister to his brother, the former Foreign Minister. This is the first instance in the history of Kuwait that the ruling monarch was not also Prime Minister. The new Prime Minister, Sheikh Sabh, is known for having a pro-globalization and pro-privatization agenda. The October 2003 election in Oman marked the first time that all Omani citizens aged 25 or older enjoyed the right to vote, raising the percentage of eligible voters from roughly 7.5% to 50% of the population of Oman. Election issues and political reforms caused controversy in Iran. In early February 2004, the Islamic Participation Front, the main reformist party, announced that it would boycott the parliamentary elections, saying they would not be free and fair. Crisis erupted over the hard-line conservative moves of the Council of Guardians (religious leaders) on political reforms – on 13 January, more than 3,000 mostly young reformists were blacklisted in the upcoming parliamentary elections; the emergency electoral reform law passed by Parliament on 25 January was also rejected by the Council.⁸

advocates can pursue MWC Committee ruling or decision on the accountability of governments towards migrants.

To increase the effectiveness of the MWC, migrant advocates continued advocacy efforts in 2004 for the global ratification of the MWC, along with education and training for migrants, and public awareness activities on the potentials, importance and limitations of the MWC. By year-end, 27 countries had ratified the MWC, and 15 others have signed but not yet ratified. Of these, six Asian countries had ratified (Philippines, Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Timor Leste); and three more have signed but not yet ratified (Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Cambodia).

In 2004, AMC, MFA and partners continued efforts to closely monitor and intervene in key international forums and UN processes in order to ensure that migrants' rights issues and agendas are asserted. The 60th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) was held from 5-10 April 2004 in Geneva. MFA sent a delegation which held strategy meetings with NGO partners such as MRI, held lobbying meetings with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Special Rapporteur on Migrants' Rights, spoke at a forum on migrants' issues and rights campaigns, and presented a statement at the UNCHR. The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM, New York) Asia-Pacific hearing took place from 17-19 May in Manila. Over 200 delegates from GCIM, UN agencies, Asian governments, and NGOs attended. The UN Secretary-General created GCIM in 2003 to highlight migration as a key global concern in the coming decade; it tasked GCIM to present a report and recommendations to the UN General Assembly on key migration concerns. AMC, MFA and several MFA members were invited as experts and resource speakers in various workshops during the meeting.

At the 92nd International Labour Conference (ILC) 2004 convened by ILO from 1-18 June 2004 in Geneva, members of a migrants' union in Hong Kong, the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU), joined the MFA delegation, asserting migrant union self-representation. MFA delegates, including AMC staff, MFA members and MRI, also presented a statement and raised migrants' issues in the discussions. Migrants' issues were also discussed at UNIFEM's Asia-Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +10 held from 30 June through 4 July 2004. There, AMC co-organized a migrants' workshop with UNIFEM; recommendations of the

workshop will form part of the "purple book" to be submitted to the CEDAW Committee.

Migrants' advocates have also been very active in providing inputs and monitoring issues relating to HIV/AIDS and mobility. AMC participated in the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, as well as the UN Task Force on HIV & Mobility meeting. AMC, representing MFA, was invited to be a co-convenor of the Task Force along with UNESCO and IOM. There are around 30 Task Force members from UN agencies, donors, people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) organizations, NGOs, and governments. At the December BACK-UP (formerly CHASPPAR) Regional Forum, migrants' rights advocates discussed collaboration among southeast Asian governments in addressing HIV and Mobility concerns, as well as multilateral MOUs that governments can submit to the ASEAN Task Force on AIDS (ATFOA).

National migration policies, laws, standards

The major national migration policy advancements in 2004 were the additional signing by Indonesia (September 2004) and Cambodia (September 2004) and the accession by Timor Leste (January 2004) to the MWC. The strategic implication is that these countries have or are in the process of harmonizing or creating national legislation and policies consistent with the MWC.

A number of migration-related law and policy changes also took place in Asia in 2004, with a number of countries passing new laws on migration.

South Korea implemented significant changes to its migration policy during 2003 and 2004 in the form of the legislation and implementation of the Act on Employment of Foreign Workers, known as the Employment Permit System (EPS). It recognizes foreign migrant laborers as a "legal" labor and stipulates that necessary foreign labor will be introduced based on bilateral agreement of two governments with the guarantee of entitlement to the same labor protection as local workers. The country failed to do away with its much-opposed Trainee System, however.

In the Mekong region, the Thai government implemented a new registration and work permit scheme for undocumented migrants in Thailand; NGOs along with migrant groups and advocates cautiously welcomed this policy. Thailand has also signed a Memorandum of

HIV/AIDS IN SOUTH & SOUTHEAST ASIA

Category	Total
Adults age 15-49 with HIV/AIDS, 2003	6,300,000
New HIV infections, 2004	890,000
Adult HIV prevalence (%), 2004	0.6
Women age 15-49 with HIV/AIDS, 2004	2,100,000
Children with HIV/AIDS, 2003	160,000
AIDS deaths, 2004	490,000

Source:UNAIDS

Understanding (MOU) on Cooperation in the Employment of Workers with Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Burma, in October 2002, May 2003, and June 2003 respectively. Mekong countries also signed an MOU on Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region in October 2004.

The Philippines government passed the Absentee Voting Law in 2003; the law was put into practice for the first time in the May 2004 national elections. Although Filipinos overseas were able to vote, voter turnout was reportedly low (See Philippines Country Report for further discussion). Also in 2003, the Philippines enacted a very progressive Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003, otherwise known as Republic Act 9208.

In Indonesia, the drafting and consultations on the proposed national law on migrants continued; migrant advocates, especially Indonesian members of MFA, carried on with interventions and advocacy for rights- and gender-based legislation. In September 2004 the Indonesian government passed Bill No. 39, which regulates the deployment of Indonesian migrant workers overseas. Ultimately, however, the long-awaited bill failed to provide necessary protections for migrant workers, and migrants' rights advocates have called for the nullification of the bill. The bill is seen as being too focused on recruitment and placement regulations, while silent on protecting the workers themselves.

In September 2004, Hong Kong's High Court heard the petition against the wage cuts on foreign domestic workers (FDWs), and the employers' levy imposed by the HK government in 2003. The court ruled that the government action was legal. In 2004, the Hong Kong government also held consultations on its proposed draft anti-racial discrimination ordinance. AMC, CMR, local groups and human rights advocates held several consultations among the action groups to consolidate

their critique and counter proposals. The key critique by migrants is that FDWs are substantively ignored or avoided by the draft proposal.

The Macau government said it was considering the adoption of a labor importation scheme for construction workers; this is intended to counteract cheap, undocumented workers from mainland China. Macau wants to import construction workers from Hong Kong at USD450/day, which is 3-4 times higher than local workers' wages. As Macau emerges as the biggest casino/gambling centre in the world, the construction boom (including 30 construction sites and 3 new casinos) is expected to create a labor shortage in the years ahead.⁹

To accelerate its ongoing "Omanization" (localization) policy, the Omani government announced plans in January 2004 that it will provide Omanis with training and know-how for jobs in the country, including menial ones, so that Omanis will replace migrant workers. Until 5 years ago, most Omanis were only willing to accept government or office jobs; migrant workers took up most of the laboring jobs, such that they comprised up to a quarter of the country's population. By 2007, Omanis will be required to take over jobs, including menial ones, whether they like it or not. The government is drawing up a law which will ban foreigners from certain jobs such as driving taxis.¹⁰

Persistent migration issues and problems in Asia

The following major migration issues/concerns persisted in Asia, with little improvement or strategic breakthroughs:

Undocumented migrants; human trafficking and smuggling

A number of countries in Asia host significant populations of undocumented migrants; related problems continued, particularly in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, and India. In addition, the trafficking and smuggling of Asian migrants to Australia, Europe and Western countries remained a significant problem, with frequent reports in the Asian media of smuggling and trafficking incidents throughout the year.

In April 2004, the European Union (EU) expressed concerns that the problem of human trafficking and



Photo courtesy of CIMA

Filipino migrant workers line up to vote, taking advantage of the Philippines' newly-enacted Absentee Voting Law.

illegal immigration was expected to worsen as the EU expands to 10 more countries by 1 May 2004. Already, tens of thousands attempt to come each year to the EU, especially through Italy; most end up in detention centers.¹¹ Certain countries were singled out during the year as the trafficking situation worsened; for example, in June 2004 OneWorld reported that the US put Bangladesh on its trafficking blacklist, classifying it as a Tier 3 country. This could cause Bangladesh to face non-trade sanctions.

Abuses, violence against migrants, contract violations; working and living conditions

Physical and sexual abuse, as well as violence against women migrants, remained key issues that AMC, MFA and partners have raised in various international fora. In 2004, MFA firmed up plans and accelerated groundwork for the setting up of an Asia-wide "Migrants Rights Violations (MRV) monitoring and reporting system." The aim is to centralize MRV reports/cases handled by MFA members and partners across Asia so that a consolidated quantitative report and analysis can be done annually; the report shall be used in lobbying and advocating for redress and action against the violations.

Contract violations, unfair labor practices, wage cuts and underpayment, mistreatment and poor

working/living conditions remain big problems of migrant workers in host countries including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Macau, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Gulf states. Extortion and abuse by labor recruitment agencies remained a major problem, which has put migrants in virtual bondage as they work for months or years without wages to pay back huge fees. Many of these fees are illegal; for example, Hong Kong law allowed only a maximum of HKD327 for agency fees, but many Indonesian recruiters charged up to HKD20,000 in 2004. These issues are discussed in more detail in the country reports in the *Asian Migrant Yearbook 2002-2003*. These were also reiterated by AMC, MFA and migrant advocates in the statements, reports, interventions and presentation made at the GCIM Asia-Pacific conference, International Labour Conference 2004, 60th session of the UNCHR, the Beijing +10 review process, etc.

WCAR and CEDAW are holding reviews in 2004 and 2005. AMC, MFA and partners are attending and intervening in these meetings to raise racial, class and gender discrimination issues against migrants and women. MFA members also carry out various programs to combat racism and discrimination in their own countries and Asia-wide.



Photo courtesy of Migrant CARE

Indonesians demonstrate in front of the Singapore Embassy in Jakarta, demanding the abolition of the death penalty; a number of Indonesian migrant workers are now facing the death penalty in the city-state. Indonesia, July 2005.

Diseases, epidemics, HIV/AIDS and migrants

HIV/AIDS remained high on the agenda of governments and advocates, especially in Southeast Asia, (BIMPS and GMS) China, and South Asia. Mobile populations including migrants are now among the priority groups. Advocates are closely monitoring this situation, since mobility is one of the factors that underpin the pattern and rate of spread of the epidemic. In Asia, Cambodia, Thailand, China, Indonesia and India are among the top concern areas.

HIV/AIDS and mobility concerns were highlighted during the XV World AIDS Conference held in 2004 in Thailand. This was the first time that the world conference was held in Asia.

Other public health threats remained on top of the agenda of WHO and health authorities – especially since the increasingly mobile and globalized world can easily create global pandemics. To the relief of national and global health officials, the SARS outbreak did not make a comeback in 2004. However, monitoring of the disease has now become part of the seasonal priority of health officials in the region. As a precautionary move, Asian

countries conducted health screenings at airports/ports of entry and put their quick reaction health teams on alert especially in the second half of 2004, in case of a SARS comeback. The bird flu outbreak worsened in Asia in 2004, however, creating a new pandemic threat. In January 2004, bird flu outbreaks were confirmed in Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Korea, China, and Lao PDR. Over 6 million chickens in Indonesia, 9 million in Thailand, thousands in Japan, and 14,000 ducks in China were culled in an effort to stop the spread of the disease. The Indonesian government appealed to the public not to panic. Vietnam confirmed several cases of human infections, including 8 human deaths from bird flu by the end of January; Thailand confirmed 4 human infections, including 2 deaths.

The WHO regional office expressed alarm at the unprecedented spread of the virus, saying that bird flu is potentially a serious threat to human health due to fears that virus will mutate to a form that can be spread between humans. According to experts, a surveillance system seeking cases of human infections needs to be implemented.¹²

Migrant deaths, injuries, occupational safety and health

Most countries in Asia fail to collect accurate data on migrants' deaths, injuries and occupational safety and health (OSH) issues. Even trade unions in host and home countries, which have long-standing OSH programs especially in collaboration with ILO and national OSH bodies, have little if any awareness of migrants' OSH concerns. This is hardly surprising considering that most trade unions in both host and home countries ignore or don't embrace migrant workers in their membership or union concerns.

For a few sending governments who keep tabs of migrant worker deaths, the annual migrant death toll remained the same:

- Bangladesh – average of 1 dead Bangladeshi migrant worker from the Middle East, every day.¹³
- Philippines – average of 2 dead Filipino migrants sent home each day.¹⁴
- Sri Lanka – average of 10-15 dead migrants per month in Lebanon.¹⁵
- Thailand – average of 1 dead Thai woman migrant worker in Japan cremated each week.¹⁶

Reflecting the large number of Asian migrant seafarers (e.g. Filipinos, Indonesians), and the health and safety hazards they face at sea, several disasters occurred in 2004 which claimed the lives of migrants. In January 2004, for example, a Norwegian cargo ship capsized in the North Sea; 24 of the 32 crew members were Filipinos. Only 8 of 24 Filipino seafarers were rescued; those missing were presumed dead.¹⁷ In September 2004, 11 Indonesian seafarers went missing in Japan when the boat they worked in broke up at sea due to a typhoon.¹⁸

'War on terror' & impacts on Asian migrants

Despite US President Bush's 1 May 2003 declaration of the end of the military offensive in Iraq, US troops continued their occupation of Iraq. Since then, the Iraqi resistance has turned into a full-blown insurgency. Violence in the streets continued, while deaths of US and coalition troop officers continued to grow. The US death toll of those killed in Iraq surpassed the 1,000 mark on 8 Sept 2004.¹⁹

The resistance against the US-led "war on terror" was again heightened in 2004 when militant groups in

various parts of the world began to abduct or kill non-US personnel – including migrants – in order to pressure their respective governments to pull out of Iraq. Following were the reported cases of Asian migrants abducted or killed in 2004 in relation to the war on terror:

- 31 August 2004 – 12 Nepalese migrant workers, who were kidnapped by militants in Iraq, were killed. This was the biggest mass killing of captured foreigners in Iraq in 2004. The Nepalese migrants were captured shortly after they arrived in Iraq on 20 August; they had been hired as cleaners and cooks. In reaction, thousands of Nepalese took to the streets in Kathmandu on 2 September to protest the execution of the 12 workers. The protesters later turned into an angry mob as they demanded revenge, ransacked and attacked a local mosque, and attacked and burned offices of employment agencies which send thousands of Nepalese migrants to the Middle East annually. They also expressed anger at the government for failing to protect the migrants. Two protesters were killed as authorities tried to stop the mob. The government imposed an indefinite curfew and declared 2 September as day of national mourning.²⁰
- August – a Filipino was held hostage in Iraq.
- 7 October – Thai Prime Minister Thaksin confirmed that a Thai migrant laborer working in Gaza was taken hostage by Palestinian militants and then killed. Israeli troops attacked and killed the militants. Thaksin advised Thai migrants to keep away from conflict areas.²¹
- 30 October – 3 UN workers (including 1 Filipino man) were abducted by militants in Afghanistan; captors threatened to kill the three unless the UN ceased operations in Afghanistan and the US released all prisoners in Guantanamo, among other demands.²²
- 31 October – the Japanese government confirmed that a Japanese tourist abducted by militants in Iraq, was beheaded by his captors. The captors demanded the pull-out of Japanese troops from Iraq, but Prime Minister Koizumi refused.
- 1 November – 4 migrant workers (including 1 Filipino, 1 Nepalese, 1 Iraqi) working for a Saudi Arabian company supplying the UN military were abducted in Iraq.²³

In addition to the direct impacts on migrants in conflict areas, the current focus on terrorism has also led to the growing tendency of receiving country governments to view migration as linked with national security issues. This exacerbates already existing practices which criminalize and discriminate against



Protester denounces the South Korean government's mass crackdown and deportation of undocumented migrant workers. Seoul, Korea, December 2003.

migrant workers. An example of this can be seen in Japan, where the government reportedly keeps the community of Muslim migrant workers under close surveillance (See Japan Country Report, p.184).

Migrants' socio-economic contributions and role in social development; remittances; reintegration concerns

A study conducted by AMC in September 2004 estimates that FDWs in Hong Kong contribute around HKD13.8 billion per year to the local economy; this is almost 1% of Hong Kong's 2004 GDP. The IOM has initiated government meetings in 2004 to discuss the social impacts of labor migration.

Sending governments, including those of the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, continued to glorify the immense benefits they receive from migrant remittances, calling migrants their modern-day heroes. These countries continue to rely on migrants' remittances to bail them out of financial crises and bring in foreign currency. In August 2004, for example, when the Philippine government announced that it was facing a serious fiscal crisis, migrant remittances were identified as one of the key factors that has been staving off the crisis.²⁴

International financial institutions (IFIs), especially the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asian Development Bank (ADB) are also increasingly looking into migrant remittances. For instance, the 2003 World Bank Global Development Report devoted a lengthy chapter to migrant remittances.

According to the October 2003 International Conference on Migrant Remittances: Development Impact, Opportunities for the Financial Sector and Future Prospects organized by WB and Department for International Development in London:

"New estimates show that documented remittance flows continue to increase at a rapid rate, putting global annual flows at US\$88 billion for 2002 ... and a projected \$90 billion for 2003 ... Actual figures may be much higher. This means that remittance flows constitute the largest source of financial flows to developing countries after foreign direct investment (FDI), and indeed in many countries exceed FDI flows, and are more stable than other capital flows such as FDI, ODA and capital market flows."

While NGOs such as AMC, Unlad Kabayan, MFA and MSAI partners, have long promoted and spearheaded the Migrant Savings and Alternative Investments (MSAI) program, concerns on the danger of governments and IFIs "hijacking" remittances to once again exploit migrant workers have been raised. AMC and MSAI partners have continuously lobbied for full

government support for migrants to participate in economic and social development decision-making, and to mobilize their savings and remittances for sustainable enterprises and community development programs in their home countries. The danger is when governments and IFIs exploit this concept by using remittances for debt repayment or deficit spending instead of social and community development, thus denying migrants control and participation in the decision-making, planning and implementation of the process. Worse, governments can use remittances as a justification for them to renege on their social development responsibilities, in effect, making migrants “finance development”. This result would be seen if home governments reduce or remove national budgets for community development relying instead on remittances, or if developed countries reduce or cease their ODAs and FDIs to poorer countries and rely instead on remittances (under the Millennium Development Goals, developed countries have committed to allocate 0.7% of their GDP to ODAs/FDIs to poorer countries).

AMC, MFA and MSAI partners have been attending, intervening and monitoring the WB, IMF, ADB and processes relating to remittances to ensure that migrants’ rights and social justice agendas are protected, rather than exploited.

Neoliberal globalization and migration; IMF, WB, WTO, APEC, SAPs, foreign debt

Nepal and Cambodia became the 147th and 148th members of the WTO respectively, amidst criticisms by NGOs and other commentators regarding the oppressive concessions made in order to join. Meanwhile, Vietnam is moving forward with membership negotiations, with predictions that the country will be a member by 2005; Lao PDR is also working towards membership.

Neoliberal globalization concerns – especially in regard to the forthcoming ministerial summits and



Indonesian migrant worker takes to the streets of Hong Kong to protest against the WTO. July 2005.

AMC Photo Library

renewed negotiations/discussions on economic policies and treaties under the WTO, APEC or ASEM – figured high again in the agendas of governments and anti-neoliberal advocates in 2004, especially in Asia. Vietnam hosted the ASEM ministerial summit in September 2004; South Korea will host the APEC ministerial summit in November 2005; and Hong Kong, the WTO 6th ministerial meeting in December 2005. These neoliberal policy summits, especially of the WTO – under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) Mode 4 in particular – are now discussing workers, including migrants, as one of the commodities that the global trading system has to regulate and trade.

Meanwhile, bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), which serve as extensions of the

IMF/WB/WTO neoliberal policies, were more actively sought by countries in Asia. Following were some of the FTAs under negotiation or signed in Asia in 2004:

- January – India signed an FTA with MERCUSOR, spearheaded by Brazil’s President Lula during his visit to India. The agreement is designed to reduce trade with developed countries; Lula advocates for closer trade among developing countries.²⁵

- January – the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) took effect. CEPA involves China, Hong Kong and Macau; it aims to narrow/lower tariffs on many products between these three in order to boost trade and economy. By August 2004, CEPA 2 was under discussion between HK and Macau.²⁶

- August – Thailand was expected to sign a free trade agreement with Lao PDR. The two countries earlier signed an agreement for linked computer systems to monitor the cross-border movement of people and drugs.²⁷ Thailand also signed FTAs with India, Australia, Japan, ASEAN and China.

- August – The Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was studying the possibility of setting up by mid-2006 of a GCC Central Bank, as a prelude to a common currency.²⁸

As in the GATS framework, the FTAs aim to promote greater capital and business cooperation among the countries concerned, but not to protect workers’ – including migrants’ – rights. In fact, these FTAs, like GATS and WTO trade agreements, undercut or strip labor rights and social welfare protection as “barriers to free trade” or unwanted costs that undermine global competitiveness.

The WTO 6th Ministerial Conference will be held in December 2005 in Hong Kong, with an aim to conclude the Doha Round of negotiations and to sign final agreements on the GATS, Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), and Non-Agriculture Manufacturing Agreement (NAMA), among others. These three agreements have major impacts on migrant workers (See Thematic Report, “Building Migrant and People’s Solidarity in Challenging Neo-liberalism & WTO” p.41 for further discussion on this issue), and thus migrants and migrants’ advocates including AMC and MFA have firmed up plans to actively intervene and campaign against the MC6.

Endnotes

¹*Bangkok Post*, 21 August 2004, p. B2.

²*CNN Asia Today*, 8 March 2004.

³*Bloomberg newsbar*, 9 October 2004.

⁴This ban stayed despite the market-oriented economic reforms spearheaded by Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s. In 1979, he affirmed that China is a socialist state, and highlighted the “4 basic principles of the constitution” as enshrined in the preamble – proletarian dictatorship, leadership of the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought, and the commitment to the socialist road.

⁵*BBC Asia Today*, 6 March 2004.

⁶*ATV World*, Main News, 21 November 2004.

⁷*CNN News / BBC News*, 2 April 2004.

⁸*BBC World*, various reports from 13 January - February 2004.

⁹*TVB Pearl News*, 12 November 2004.

¹⁰*BBC World*, 13 January 2004.

¹¹*DW*, 27 April 2004.

¹²Various reports from *CNN*, *BBC*, *Channel News Asia*, *ATV News*, 11-28 January 2004.

¹³RMMRU research, 2001.

¹⁴Government data.

¹⁵Philippines Ambassador quoting SL officials, June 2004.

¹⁶Thai consular official in Japan, 8 December 2002.

¹⁷Media report, 20-21 January 2004.

¹⁸*TVB Pearl Late News*, 8 September 2004.

¹⁹*ATV World Late News*, 8 September 2004.

²⁰*TVB Pearl News*, 1 September 2004.

²¹*FM 107*, Thailand, 7 October 2004.

²²*TVB Pearl News*, 1 November 2004.

²³*TVB Pearl Main News*, 1 November 2004.

²⁴*The Nation*, 24 August 2004.

²⁵*BBC World*, 26 January 2004.

²⁶*CCTV 9*, 30 August 2004.

²⁷*CCTV 9*, 30 August 2004.

²⁸*CCTV 9*, 30 August 2004.