

RIZANA NAFEEK AND THE ECONOMY

In the euphoria about victory in battle, people seem to be in denial about the serious economic situation and the huge social problems the country is facing - including the plight of displaced persons and migrant workers. The current economic crisis—spiralling inflation, loss of foreign investment, the fall in value of the rupee, the collapse of tourism, the sharp dip in the stock market, and the slowing down of projects—has severely affected workers in Sri Lanka and has eroded the purchasing power of all classes. The burden of the cost of living however, weighs heaviest on the poorest of the poor. The all-round rise in prices—of food, kerosene, petrol, gas, transport and all goods and services—has occurred with hardly any rise in wages. Thus, in effect, the real wages of all have slumped alarmingly. But protest has been muted since the exigencies of the war have made people less likely to strike or demonstrate. Yet, for how long can people bear such hardships?

The situation today is reminiscent of the disasters that occurred in the early 1970s when the sudden, sharp rise in the world price of oil created great hardships locally. This was reflected, at that time, in the increased poverty levels, starvation, a rise in malnutrition and infant mortality, along with the stunting and wasting of children, and shocking scenes of people scavenging for food.

Today, the irony of the situation is that the government's largest foreign exchange earnings come from the

poverty-stricken themselves - namely the cheap labour of Sri Lankan workers. Mao Zedong once said that "women hold up half the sky." It seems that the poorest among the women of Sri Lanka - from urban slums, villages and plantations - are "holding up" the economy through three main areas; foreign employment, work in garment factories and on the tea and rubber estates. In the Middle East, the largest number of Sri Lankan workers are women employed as domestic labour. These workers also help reduce the unemployment problem in the island. Many do well and earn several times what they could in Sri Lanka but for others, the story is sometimes one of harsh treatment abroad and the squandering of their money by their families at home. The plight of those women subject to cruelty has been highlighted in the press, but governments are torn between intervening in abuses that take place affecting Sri Lankan workers abroad, and the need to increase foreign employment - since this is the source of the much-needed foreign exchange.

Recently labour officials in the southern Chinese province of Guang-dong raised the question of the bad treatment and low wages in famous fast-food multinationals such as Pizza Hut, McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken where Chinese part-time workers are paid less than the minimum wage and have to work full-time hours without full-time benefits. The Chinese government intervened to obtain improved conditions. It is also well-

known that in Malaysia, Sri Lankan workers at such multinationals are treated shabbily and over-worked, without any other means of redress except to 'bolt' and work as 'illicit' labour, thereby often risking ending up in prison. But does the Sri Lankan government seriously intervene about their plight? Does it have the bargaining power to do so?

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Clashing with the oppressive practices or harsh laws of the host country, is also not possible for individual migrants: It is the Sri Lanka government that has to show more concern and intervene effectively on issues of migrant labour. Recently 17-year old Rizana Nafeek, from an impoverished family in Sri Lanka was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia for the accidental death of an infant in the house where she worked. This has shocked local and international opinion, leading to some concern shown by the government. Protests by local organizations and international condemnation has again highlighted the question of migrant Sri Lankan, and the corrupt employment agencies which mislead and exploit workers.

The *Women's Manifesto* issued by 12 women's groups has referred to many of these problems and the weaknesses of the government on the issue of migrant labour. It has urged the signing of bilateral agreements between the State and recipient countries for enforcement of standardized contracts, with minimum standards for recruitment, working conditions, repatriation, and more labour and welfare offices. The *Manifesto* also calls for free legal assistance and counseling for migrant workers in recipient countries; a system of social security, and the granting of the right to vote to migrants at Sri Lanka elections.

The issue of the human rights of migrant workers is now drawing more interest and the case of Rizana Nafeek has helped to publicize their plight. Induwara Thilakarathne and Ranga Chandrarathne have written in the *Sunday Observer* (15 July 2007) on her case and have commented on the 'Social

Cost of a Dollar Spinner'. They emphasize the need for a comprehensive policy on migrant workers, including social security schemes, day care centres for migrants' children, increased intervention on behalf of migrants by the Sri Lankan embassies, and a policy of better training of domestic workers before they take jobs abroad. The writers claim that if social security measures are not followed, the consequences of migration would be very high, making a dire warning that the workers' "hard-earned foreign currency would be of no use," and the very existence of local society thereby endangered, if the social cost is too high.

One hopeful sign is that the problem of migration is receiving official attention and top priority at the highest international levels, culminating in the launching of the Global Forum on Migration and Development. At this Forum held in July 2007 in Belgium, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon referred to the world's 200 million migrants as "one of the great global challenges of our century." As Noeleen Heyzer, the Executive Director of the UN Development Fund for Women states, the bulk of migrants are semi-skilled and unskilled workers who take low wages and sometimes perform dangerous work. The Rizana Nafeek tragedy proves how dangerous the work can be, even involving the possibility of a death sentence. Her case has served to highlight the whole issue of migration, and the need for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of the 'export of labour' (or, what has been called, the new international division of labour.) and a fresh look at the government's record on the signing the need for of International Conventions on migrant labour. **P**

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