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## Migration between South and Southeast Asia: Overview of Trends and Issues

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### 1. Introduction

International migration is an important facet of globalization today. There were an estimated 214 million international migrants in 2009, constituting around 3.1 percent of the world's population, up from around 82 million in 1970, reflecting the huge increase in international migration flows over the past few decades.<sup>2</sup> An interesting feature of this migration is the growing importance of South-South migration flows. It is estimated that around 47 percent of migrants from developing countries migrate to other developing countries. The number of migrants in the South has increased by 75 percent over the past 40 years, with the true size of South-South migration estimated at around 74 million.<sup>3</sup> Hence, South-South migration is almost as large as South-North migration and developing countries and developing countries are confronted with policy challenges as both source and host nations.

Asia is the second most important host region for international migrants, next only to Europe. According to United Nations statistics, in 2005, the region was host to 54.2 million migrants

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

<sup>3</sup> Dilip Ratha, William Shaw, 'South-South Migration and Remittances', World Bank Working paper. 102, p.5, Washington, DC (April 2007)

with 61 million international migrants, or 29 percent of the world's migrant stock in 2010. Asia has exhibited the highest growth as a host region for migrants in the 2005-10 period with an annual average growth rate of 2.1 percent in the stock of migrants hosted by the region during this period.<sup>4</sup> These trends reflect the fact that Asia is home to some of the most important destination countries for migrant workers in the world. For instance, the Gulf countries are among the most important destination markets for low and semi-skilled workers from developing countries. Since the 1980s, several countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have also become important destinations for low and semi-skilled workers from poorer countries.<sup>5</sup> Asia is also home to some of the main source countries for migrant workers. The Asian economies of China, India, and the Philippines are the leading source countries for migrant workers to the rest of the world, with estimated overseas diaspora of 35 million, 20 million and 7 million, respectively.<sup>6</sup> The significance of Asia as a source region for migration is also indicated by the fact that several Asian countries figure among the leading recipients of remittances in the world.

This paper is the first of two working papers on migration flows between South and Southeast Asian countries and the role and prospects for interstate cooperation in managing these flows. This paper focuses on the nature of migration flows for the aforementioned migration corridor in Asia, i.e. that, between the source countries of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in South Asia and the destination countries of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand in Southeast Asia and to a limited extent also Korea in East Asia. Section 2 following this introduction provides an overview of the migration context in Asia, highlighting the main source and recipient countries and sub-regions within Asia. Section 3 outlines the general trends and characteristics of migration to Southeast Asia as a destination market. Section 4 discusses the nature of migration from South Asia to the rest of the world and specifically to selected Southeast Asian countries. It discusses the occupational and skill profile of this migration corridor. Section 5 highlights the issues and concerns that have arisen in the context of South-Southeast Asian migration by providing examples from selected countries regarding violation of workers' rights and inter-country disputes. Section 6 summarizes the discussion and concludes by underscoring the criticality of intraregional cooperation in managing migration between these two sub-regions of Asia, an issue discussed at length in the sequel to this working paper.

## **2. Overview of Migration in Asia**

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 'International Migration 2009', Retrieved at [http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2009Migration\\_Chart/ittmig\\_wallchart09.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2009Migration_Chart/ittmig_wallchart09.pdf). Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See, Athukorala (1999) and Ronald Skeldon, *Migration and development: a global perspective* (Longman, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> See, <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/facts-and-figures/regional-and-country-figures>.

Migration in Asia is shaped by a combination of social, economic, and political factors. There are four broad groups of countries which characterize migration flows in Asia as highlighted by immigration and emigration statistics for countries in the region. These include: (1) economies such as Vietnam, Laos, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and the People’s Republic of China which have very low rates of immigration and are purely net outmigration countries; (2) developed economies such as Singapore, Hong Kong and oil rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and UAE) which are primarily recipient countries with very high immigration rates; (3) rapidly developing economies such as Thailand and Malaysia which are both recipient and source nations for migrant workers; and (4) countries such as Pakistan and India which not only send a large number of workers overseas but also account for a significant stock of immigrants due to instability in their immediate neighborhood.

The significance of migration for the Asian region is also evident from the very high rates of immigration and emigration in several Asian countries. In 2005, excluding India and China, the overall immigration and emigration rates for the developing Asian economies stood at 1.8 percent and 2.2 percent, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The immigration and emigration rates for select Asian countries are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Rates of Immigration into and Emigration from select Asian economies (%)**

Sub-regions in Asia	Immigration (2005)	Immigration (2010)	Emigration (2005)	Emigration (2010)
<b>East Asia</b>				
China, People's Rep. of	0	0.1	0.5	0.6
Hong Kong, China	42.5	38.8	9.2	10.2
Korea, Rep. of	1.2	1.1	3.3	4.3
Mongolia	0.4	0.4	0.6	1.2
<b>South Asia</b>				
Afghanistan	0.2	0.3	7.5	8.1
Bangladesh	0.7	0.7	3.1	3.3
Bhutan	1.5	5.7	5.8	6.3
India	0.5	0.4	0.9	0.9
Maldives	1.1	1.0	0.5	0.6
Nepal	3	3.2	2.7	3.3

<sup>7</sup> ‘Asian Workers on the Move’, Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Asian Development Bank, Philippines (April 2008), pp.77-96.

Pakistan	2.1	2.3	2.1	2.5
Sri Lanka	1.9	1.7	4.7	9.1
<b>Southeast Asia</b>				
Cambodia	2.2	2.2	2.4	2.3
Indonesia	0.1	0.1	0.8	1.1
Lao PDR	0.4	0.3	6.8	5.7
Malaysia	6.4	8.4	5.4	5.3
Myanmar	0.2	0.2	0.9	1.0
Philippines	0.4	0.5	4.1	4.6
Singapore	42.6	40.7	5	6.1
Thailand	1.7	1.7	1.2	1.2
Vietnam	0	0.1	2.6	2.5
<b>West Asia</b>				
Jordan	42.1	45.9	0.9	11.3
Qatar	80.5	86.5	0.8	0.7
Saudi Arabia	26.8	27.8	0.7	0.7
Lebanon	17.7	17.8	1	15.6
Oman	25.5	28.4	0.7	0.5
UAE	70	70	0.9	1.2
Yemen	2.2	2.1	1	4.7

**Source:** Compiled from World Bank (2011), Migration and Remittance Factbook, [http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a\\_p](http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a_p) and World Bank, data catalog on migration and remittances, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/migration-and-remittances> (accessed on October 7, 2011)

**Note:** The immigration rate is defined as the ratio of the immigrant stock to the total population of the receiving country, and the emigration rate is defined as the ratio of the emigrant stock to the sum of the sending country's population and emigrant stock.

As shown above, barring the most populous countries of India, China, and Indonesia, the emigration rates are over 2 percent for most of the Asian countries. Even for the more populous countries for which the emigration rates are much lower, in absolute terms, the extent of emigration is clearly very large given their huge populations. The data also indicate

the significance of immigration for several Asian economies such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and those in West Asia, where migrants constitute between 20 to 80 percent of the population. There has also been a two to threefold increase in the migrant stock in many Asian host countries over the past two decades. The number of migrants in Singapore has increased from around 720,000 in 1990 to an estimated 1.966 million in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, between 1990 and 2010, the migrant stock is estimated to have increased from 380,000 to 1.2 million for Thailand, from 1 million to 2.4 million for Malaysia, from 370,000 to 1.3 million for Qatar, and from 1.1 million to nearly 3 million for Jordan, reflecting their growing importance as destination markets. Female migrants constitute nearly half of the migrant stock in several source countries for migrant workers (e.g., 44.5 percent in Indonesia, 51.1 percent in the Philippines, 49.8 percent in Sri Lanka).<sup>9</sup> By 2000, there were an estimated 5 million female migrants in East and South East Asia.<sup>10</sup>

The significance of migration in Asia is also reflected by the huge remittance flows and their contribution to the economies in this region. In 2007, total remittance receipts by developing Asian economies were estimated at \$108.1 billion, or over one-third of total global remittance inflows and surpassing their total official development assistance by a large margin.<sup>11</sup> Table 2 provides the remittance receipts and payments for select Asian countries in absolute terms and in terms of their contribution to each country's GDP.

**Table 2: Remittance Receipts and Payments for Select Asian Countries (2009), (US\$ mns and % of GDP)**

Country	Remittance Receipts (RR)	RR as % of GDP	Remittance Payments (RP)	RP as % of GDP
Bangladesh	10,523	11.78	8	0.01
China	48,729	0.98	4,444	0.09
India	49,256	3.57	4,000	0.29
Indonesia	6,793	1.26	2,702	0.50
Japan	1,776	0.04	4,069	0.08
Jordan	3,597	14.34	502	2.00
Korea, Rep.	2,522	0.30	3,120	0.37

<sup>8</sup> Migration and Remittance Factbook, available at [http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a\\_p](http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a_p); Data catalog on migration and remittances, available at <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/migration-and-remittances>, World Bank (2011), Washington, DC, accessed on October 7, 2011

<sup>9</sup> Migration and Remittance Factbook, available at [http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a\\_p](http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a_p); Data catalog on migration and remittances, available at <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/migration-and-remittances>, World Bank (2011). Accessed on October 7, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> 'Asian Workers on the Move', Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Asian Development Bank, Philippines (April 2008).

<sup>11</sup> World Development Indicators Database, available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>. Accessed October 7, 2011.

Kuwait	-	-	9,912	9.06
Lebanon	7,558	21.64	5,749	16.46
Malaysia	1,110	0.57	6,800	3.52
Nepal	2,986	23.15	12	0.09
Pakistan	8,720	5.38	8	0.00
Philippines	19,766	11.74	58	0.03
Saudi Arabia	217	0.06	25,969	6.97
Sri Lanka	3,363	7.99	435	1.03
Thailand	1,637	0.62	-	-
Vietnam	6,626	6.82	-	-
Yemen, Rep.	1,378	5.23	337	1.28

**Source:** Compiled from World Bank (2011), *Migration and Remittance Factbook*, [http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a\\_p](http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821382189?mode=a_p) and World Bank, *World Development Indicators Database*, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>, (accessed October 7, 2011)

As indicated by the remittance data, the most important source countries for remittances are in the Middle East again confirming their significance as the main destination markets in Asia and their very high reliance on foreign workers to meet local labour market requirements. The other host country with sizeable remittance payments to GDP is Malaysia. (check for Singapore) Remittance receipts constitute a high proportion of GDP in several source countries, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan in South Asia, and the Philippines and Vietnam in Southeast Asia. Even for larger economies such as India and Pakistan, remittance receipts are considerable in absolute terms as well as relative to GDP. Thus the remittance data reflect the source and destination country characteristics of Asia's migration flows outlined earlier.

An important feature of migration within Asia is its intraregional and sub-regional nature, as is evident from the six broad subsystems which characterize Asia's migration flows.<sup>12</sup> These include:

- the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) subsystem comprising of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE which serve as destination markets mainly for workers from South Asia and the Philippines;

<sup>12</sup> Five of these subsystems have been outlined in Battistella, G., 'Migration without Borders: A Long Way to Go in the Asian Region', United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Series on Migration without Borders (January 24, 2005).

- the Indian subcontinent system where the South Asian countries of India and Pakistan also serve as destination markets for migrant workers from Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Afghanistan;
- the Indo-Chinese system where Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand constitute important destination markets for countries such as Bangladesh, India, Philippines, and Indonesia in South and South East Asia;
- the Hong Kong-Taiwan system in which Hong Kong and Taiwan attract migrants from the People's Republic of China<sup>13</sup>, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand in South East Asia; and
- the Northeast Asia system in which Japan and Korea constitute the focus markets for migrants from China, the Philippines, and Thailand
- The West Asian and Arab subsystem where there is considerable movement within the subregion from poorer countries such as Yemen and Jordan to the oil rich Arab countries of Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait.

The GCC and the Indo-Chinese subsystems are numerically the most significant components of migration flows in Asia as these cover the main destination and source countries for Asian migrants. The most important destination region is the Middle East followed by Malaysia and Singapore in Southeast Asia. The most important source regions are South Asia and Indonesia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia. According to estimates, between 1995 and 1999, some 2.6 million workers in Asia went to work abroad on contracts. Workers from Southeast Asia made up 50 percent of these outflows followed by workers from South Asian countries.<sup>14</sup> Most of these workers went to the Gulf states for employment in service, trade, and construction jobs. The other migration subsystems in Asia are relatively smaller in absolute numbers though often significant relative to the size of the receiving and sending economies. In recent years, however, new patterns of migration have also emerged in Asia, with flows of professionals and technical workers especially in the IT and nursing sectors within the region (though primarily from the region to countries in Europe and North America).

In terms of skill and occupational profile, much of Asian migration relates to temporary contractual movement of workers. These flows can be segmented into skilled, semi-skilled, and low skilled migration, though the bulk of intra Asian migration consists of low and semi-

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<sup>13</sup> China stands 4th in the list of Top Emigration Countries with 8.3 million migrants in 2010. The top Asian destinations countries from China include: Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Republic of Korea. The main non Asian countries for Chinese migrants are: USA, Canada, Australia, Macao and Italy.

<sup>14</sup> 'Asian Workers on the Move', Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Asian Development Bank, Philippines (April 2008).

skilled movement and rural labour migrants. Low skilled migrants are largely engaged in factories, plantation work, agriculture, construction labour, transport operations while semi-skilled migrants mainly work as nurses or clerical staff. Given the high proportion of female migrants in the region, occupations such as domestic work and entertainment feature among the main jobs performed by migrant workers, often with associated problems of exploitation and abuse.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, Asia's labour migration is characterized by several key features. It is by and large temporary, intraregional, and tends to follow existing migration routes and patterns. There is a high degree of feminization, with female migrants outnumbering male migrants in many sending and receiving countries. Notwithstanding the existence of legal frameworks, migration in Asia is mostly in the hands of private agents and often subject to abusive practices. There is also a large amount of irregular and undocumented migration.

### **3. Southeast Asia as a Destination Market**

The usual pull and push factors of differences in wages and living conditions, which are discussed in the migration literature, underlie the migration flows that occur within the above subsystems.<sup>16</sup> But there are also region-specific factors which have driven migration flows within Asia. In addition to the oil boom and subsequent spurt in construction and infrastructure related activity which has driven migration to the Gulf countries since the 1970s, the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) of East and Southeast Asia have also emerged as important destination markets since the 1980s due to their rapid economic growth and increased job opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Migration plays an important structural role in these economies by helping to address labour market shortages, to meet specific skill requirements, and promote growth. In Singapore, the share of non-resident workers in the labour force increased from 18 percent in 1991 to 27.5 percent in 2006 and further to 33.8 percent in

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<sup>15</sup> Wickramasekara, P., 'Rights of Migrant Workers in Asia: Any Light at the end of the Tunnel?', International Migration Papers No. 75, ILO, Geneva(2004); Wickramasekara, P. 'Asian Migration: Issues and Challenges in an Era of Globalization', International Migration Papers No. 57, ILO, Geneva(2002);, AsiaNews.it (2011) and many other reports and media articles on abuse and exploitation of Asian migrant workers.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, N., 'Migration without Borders: The Economic Perspective', United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Series on Migration without Borders (March 31, 2004); International Organization for Migration (IOM), "International Migration and Development: Perspectives and Experiences of the IOM", Geneva (April 2006); Martin, P., 'Another Miracle? Managing Labour Migration in Asia', United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Asia and the Pacific, Thailand (September 2008); United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), 'Key Trends and Challenges on International Migration and Development in Asia and the Pacific', United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Asia and the Pacific (January 2009).

<sup>17</sup> See Battistella, G., 'Migration without Borders: A Long Way to Go in the Asian Region', United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Series on Migration without Borders (January 24, 2005), 'Asian Workers on the Move', Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Asian Development Bank, Philippines (April 2008), World Development Report (2009).



2010.<sup>18</sup> It is further estimated that foreign workers contributed 3.2 percentage points to the annual GDP growth rate of 7.8 percent during the 1990s. Foreign workers constituted over 6 percent of the labour force in the economies of Malaysia, Thailand, and Hong Kong in the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> The following tables highlight the importance of migrant workers in selected NICs, namely, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

**Table 3: Migration in Singapore**

Variable	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Estimated number of international migrants at mid-year	727301	991549	1351806	1493976	1966865
Estimated number of refugees at mid-year	313	62	1	2	6
International migrants as a percentage of the population	24.1	28.5	33.6	35	40.7
Female migrants as percentage of all international migrants	52.8	54.1	55.5	55.8	56
Refugees as a percentage of international migrants	0	0	0	0	0
Annual rate of change of the migrant stock (%)	6.2	6.2	2	5.5	

**Source:** United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009), “Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision” (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2008)

**Table 4: Migration in Malaysia**

Variable	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Estimated number of international migrants at mid-year	1014156	1192734	1553777	2029208	2357603
Estimated number of refugees at mid-year	62672	5293	50502	29299	35122
International migrants as a percentage of the population	5.6	5.8	6.7	7.9	8.4
Female migrants as percentage of all international migrants	44.7	44.6	44.8	45	45.2
Refugees as a percentage of international migrants	6.2	0.4	3.3	1.4	1.5
Annual rate of change of the migrant stock (%)	3.2	5.3	5.3	3	

**Source:** United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009), “Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision” (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2008)

**Table 5: Migration in Thailand**

Variable	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Estimated number of international migrants at mid-year	387454	548824	791560	981960	1157263

<sup>18</sup> Department of Statistics, Singapore (2011).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Asian Workers on the Move’, Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Asian Development Bank, Philippines (April 2008).

Estimated number of refugees at mid-year	99878	103691	102549	119096	129380
International migrants as a percentage of the population	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.5	1.7
Female migrants as percentage of all international migrants	46.7	47.5	48.4	48.4	48.4
Refugees as a percentage of international migrants	25.8	18.9	13	12.1	11.2
Annual rate of change of the migrant stock (%)	7	7.3	4.3	3.3	

**Source:** United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009), “Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision” (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2008)

The above trends are indicative of several important characteristics of migration to these countries in Southeast Asia. There has been a more than doubling of the stock of international migrants in all three countries over the 1990-2010 period. Singapore has experienced the most rapid growth in its migrant population and is the most reliant on foreign labour within this region. The share of international migrants in the total population has risen from 24 percent to 40 percent over the given period, while this share remains small at less than 2 percent in the case of Thailand. The trends indicate that Malaysia has increased its dependence on foreign workers, though this share is still less than 10 percent. There is also a strong gender dimension to the migrant stock in all these countries, with female migrants constituting nearly half or more of the total migrant stock (e.g., 45.6 percent of migrants from South Asia, 47.4 percent of migrants from East Asia and the Pacific).<sup>20</sup> This feminization reflects gender-selective policies in some of these countries and the presence of gender-specific employment opportunities, such as in domestic work and caregiving. While male migration to these countries is mainly in response to labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture and construction in which the local population does not want to work, female migration has specifically been promoted in some of the Southeast Asian countries.

Most of the migration to these countries is temporary and has historically involved short-term contractual labour engaged in low and semi-skilled labour-intensive activities, filling jobs where nationals do not want to work. In recent years, however, there is also a trend towards migration by highly skilled workers to these Southeast Asian countries, involving professionals and executives engaged in the provision of skilled and specialized services and complementing investment flows and local employment.<sup>21</sup> The following tables illustrate the occupational profile of migrants in Malaysia and Thailand and the sectoral profile of migrants in Malaysia, based on ILO statistics. The data indicate that the majority of migrant workers in Malaysia are engaged in low and semi-skilled jobs while in Thailand, there is greater

<sup>20</sup> Over 40 percent of Asia’s migrant stock consists of female workers, roughly in line with the proportions seen for other regions and for the world as a whole. Female migrants in Asia work in the healthcare sector, in sales, in the hospitality sector, and in domestic work. See, World Bank (2011).

<sup>21</sup> In Malaysia, the bulk of migrant workers are employed in low and semi-skilled labour-intensive activities, with the manufacturing sector accounting for close to 30 percent, followed by the plantation sector (around 20 percent), domestic services (around 17 percent) and construction (14.5 percent).

dependence on professional and managerial jobs. Similar statistics are not available for Singapore.

**Table 6: Inflows of employed migrants by occupation**

Occupation	Malaysia (2000)	Share of total (%)	Thailand (2001)	Share of total (%)
Total	77100		59978	
0/1 Professional, technical and related workers	2300	2.98	18279	30.48
2 Administrative and managerial workers	1700	2.20	27520	45.88
3 Clerical and related workers	300	0.39	846	1.41
4 Sales workers	1700	2.20	812	1.35
5 Service workers	21800	28.27	1592	2.65
6 Agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry workers, fishermen and hunters	21800	28.27	981	1.64
7/8/9 Production and related workers, transport equipment operators and labourers	27500	35.67	2450	4.08

**Source:** ILO, <http://laborsta.ilo.org/STP/guest>, Table M9 for Malaysia and Thailand (accessed on Oct 7, 2011)

**Table 7: Inflows of employed migrants by sector in Malaysia (2002)**

Total	95054	Share of total (%)
A Agriculture, Hunting and Forestry	31549	33.19
C Mining and Quarrying		
D Manufacturing	26826	28.22
F Construction	7165	7.54
G Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles, Motorcycles and Personal and Household Goods	2110	2.22
H Hotels and Restaurants	3103	3.26
I Other Community, Social, and Personal Services	25303	26.62

**Source:** ILO, <http://laborsta.ilo.org/STP/guest>, Table M8 for Malaysia (re accessed on Oct 7, 2011)

There is also considerable undocumented or illegal migration to these countries. There were an estimated 700,000 undocumented workers in Malaysia in 2005 and an estimated 2.4 million unauthorized migrants from developing Asia in Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taipei, and Thailand.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Thailand has a relatively high share of refugees in its

<sup>22</sup> Asia as a whole hosts a large number of irregular or undocumented migrants, who are not captured in official migration statistics. The latter reflects unauthorized movement across porous borders and inadequacies in existing institutional mechanisms to track such flows. See<sup>22</sup> 'Asian Workers on the Move', Asian Development Outlook (ADO), Asian Development Bank, Philippines (April 2008), pp.82.

migrant population, reflecting the inflows from its neighbouring countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.

#### **4. Migration from South Asia**

South Asia is one of the main source sub-regions for migrants in Asia. In 2010, the five major South Asian labour-sending countries, namely, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal sent over 24 million emigrants abroad. Of this, India sent 11,375,500 migrants abroad; Bangladesh, 5,380,800; Sri Lanka, 1,847,500; Nepal, 982,200; and Pakistan, 4,677,000. The significance of migration for the South Asian countries is evident from the fact that the five major sending countries in this sub-region received over \$81.5 billion in remittances in 2010 (up from \$40 billion in 2002), with India receiving \$55 billion, Bangladesh, \$11 billion, Pakistan, \$9 billion, Sri Lanka, \$3 billion, and Nepal, \$3.5 billion in 2010. Remittances to South Asia increased from \$17.2 billion in 2000 to \$74.9 billion in 2009, making it the single biggest recipient country for remittances, surpassing China for the first time, that year. Overall, remittances constitute between 3 to 23 percent or more of the GDPs of these countries.<sup>23</sup>

Migration from South Asia shows three broad patterns. These include migration for permanent settlement in the developed countries, movement of contract-based migrant workers mainly to the Middle East and to a lesser extent to Southeast Asia, and intraregional short-term, seasonal, and irregular (undocumented) movement within the South Asian region itself (mainly to India). The region is also characterized by a large proportion of female migrants who mostly work as domestic helpers in the informal sector of the receiving countries, although the extent of feminization varies with the proportion of female migrants amounting to over 60 percent in the case of Sri Lanka compared to less than 1 percent in the case of Pakistan, reflecting differences in sending country migration policies. Migration for higher education is also significant for this region with South Asian students constituting a sizeable proportion of the international student population. A noteworthy characteristic of South Asian migration is its reliance on private fee-charging recruiters for facilitating the movement of low and semi-skilled workers, often raising concerns about possible abuse and exploitation by such agents.<sup>24</sup> An important development in recent years is the growing importance of temporary migration of highly skilled workers and of circular migration,

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<sup>23</sup> World Bank (2011).

<sup>24</sup> For example, see, Lawson, A., 'Agencies Exploit South Asian Workers', available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/3618352.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3618352.stm), BBC News Online (September 2004). Accessed on November 7, 2011; Castles, S. and M. Miller, 'Migration in the Asia-Pacific Region', available at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=733>, Migration Policy Institute (July 2009), accessed on November 6, 2011; Wickramasekara, P., 'Rights of Migrant Workers in Asia: Any Light at the end of the Tunnel?', International Migration Papers No. 75, ILO, Geneva(2004); Wickramasekara, P. 'Asian Migration: Issues and Challenges in an Era of Globalization', International Migration Papers No. 57, ILO, Geneva(2002).

particularly from India. This trend reflects the growing role of investment and presence of global firms in these economies as well as growth in the information technology services sector which relies on complementary short-term movement of professionals.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.1 The South Asia-Southeast Asian Migration Corridor

Migration from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka in South Asia to the Southeast Asian countries of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand constitutes an important migration corridor in Asia. This fits within the Indo-Chinese migration subsystems highlighted earlier. Table 8 shows the direction of migration flows from major source countries in South Asia to the rest of Asia and illustrates the existence of this sub-regional migration route (in addition to the Gulf migration subsystem). Malaysia and Singapore are two common destination markets in Southeast Asia for workers from all the South Asian countries.

**Table 8: Main Destination Markets for Migrants from Select South Asian Countries**

Country of Origin	Number ('000s)	Main Destination Countries
<b>Bangladesh</b>	5,380.2	Malaysia, Jordan, India Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, UK, USA, Italy
<b>India</b>	11,357.5	Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, UK, USA, Canada
<b>Nepal</b>	982.1	Thailand, India, Japan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UK, USA, Canada, Australia
<b>Pakistan</b>	4,667	India, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, UK, USA, Italy, Canada
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	1,847.5	India, Jordan Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, UK, Canada, Italy

**Source:** Compiled from World Bank (2011), *Migration and Remittance Factbook*

It is worth putting the South Asia-Southeast Asia migration corridor in perspective. According to Ratha and Shaw (2007), of an estimated 20.2 million migrants from South Asia, 0.29 million were in East Asia and the Pacific region, significantly less than the number of South Asian migrants in the Middle East (2.11 million) and the high income OECD countries

<sup>25</sup> Migration Information Resource-Emigration, Immigration, and Diaspora Relations in India, available at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=745>, World Bank, Washington, DC (2011), accessed on November 9, 2011.

(5.6 million) or that within the region (7.6 million).<sup>26</sup> However, as a single regional market, Southeast Asia is the third most important destination market for South Asian migrants.

For the Southeast Asian countries, South Asia is the second main source region and accounts for about 9 percent of the total stock of migrants in this region. For instance, in 2005, India accounted for 6.9 percent of all migrant workers in Malaysia, the third largest source for foreign labour in that country. As a single source region, South Asia (including Nepal) accounted for around 20 percent of all registered migrant workers in Malaysia in 2006.<sup>27</sup> There has been a certain path dependence to these migration flows given the large diaspora population from South Asia in some of the Southeast Asian countries. According to the Government of India's High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, in 2001 there were an estimated 1,665,000 Indians living in Malaysia, 307,000 in Singapore, and 85,000 in Thailand, quite comparable to the diaspora in other important host countries such as the US, UK, and some of the Gulf countries.<sup>28</sup> Table 9 provides the bilateral estimates for migrant stocks for all the South Asian countries in the selected destination countries in Asia.

**Table 9: Bilateral Estimates of Migrant Stocks, 2010**

Source country (down)	Destination country									
	India	Japan	Jordan	Korea, Rep.	Malaysia	Nepal	Philippines	Singapore	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Afghanistan	8,414	710					973			
Bangladesh	3,299,268	11,385	56,978	5,227	122,912	641	939	20,432		5,180
China	25,631	613,890	76,221	281,685	125,584	10,905	43,672	497,929	316	376,487
India		20,827	28,974	2,848	106,880	831,432	5,767	157,114	336,352	24,219
Indonesia	852	25,916	85,717	15,861	1,397,684		5,865	102,332		1,459
Japan	745		856	12,320	19,595		7,780		83	26,502
Jordan		172					64			
Korea, Rep.		600,336	781				2,275			3,354
Malaysia	12,945	8,043	2,334	1,252			394	1,060,628	190	3,429
Maldives	207	34								
Nepal	564,906	9,492	1,493	3,092			767			35,860
Pakistan	1,150,952	9,440	26,776	5,378	16,477	21,324	1,534	22,932	133	7,764
Thailand		41,861	856	21,217	79,604		150			
Singapore	4,400	2,510			103,318		288		73	2,134
Sri Lanka	161,472	8,791	102,709	8,072	4,453	722	189	3,016		27,015

<sup>26</sup> Dilip Ratha, William Shaw, 'South-South Migration and Remittances', World Bank Working paper. 102, Table 2, p.6, Washington, DC (April 2007).

<sup>27</sup> IOM et. al (2008), p.57.

<sup>28</sup> Government of India, The Indian Diaspora, Report of the High Level Committee Report on the Indian Diaspora, available at <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm>, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 2001, accessed on October 24, 2011.

**Source:** Compiled from World Bank, World Development Indicators Database, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>, (accessed October 7, 2011).

It is evident from Table 9 that intraregional migration within South Asia, from the other South Asian countries (especially from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan) to India far exceeds the extent of migration from these countries to the three markets in Southeast Asia. India dominates among the South Asian countries as a source of migrant workers, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh. Singapore and Malaysia constitute the main destination markets in the Southeast Asia subregion for most of the South Asian countries. It is important to point out, however, that the estimates for the number of migrants vary considerable across different reports. According to one source, there are as many as 350,000 Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia, far greater than what is shown above.<sup>29</sup> Overall, studies and forecasts for this region suggest that migration will continue to play an important role in these countries. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2006) forecasts that between 2005 and 2015, Singapore and Thailand will witness higher growth in labour demand than the growth in their working age population, creating increased pressure on their labour markets and thus necessitating continued reliance on foreign labour.

Estimates for the bilateral flow of remittances are provided in Table 10. As is evident, although the total volume of remittances from these destination markets is not that large, in the order of \$1.5 to \$3 billion, the share of the South Asian countries in these remittance flows is significant, ranging from 9 percent for Malaysia to 15 percent for Singapore. In comparison, for the South Asian countries, remittances from these Southeast Asian countries constitute a small share of their total inward remittances. Hence, there is an asymmetry in this migration relationship with South Asia constituting an important source of foreign labour for these Southeast Asian countries while Southeast Asia is relatively less important as a destination market for South Asia. But for neither group is the other the main source or main destination market. According to RBI estimates, East Asia accounted for 8 percent of remittances to India in 2006, compared to 44 percent for North America, 24 percent for the Gulf countries, and 13 percent for Europe.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 10: Estimated Bilateral Remittances (millions of \$s), 2010**

Remittance-sending country	Remittance-receiving country										
	Bangladesh	China	India	Indonesia	Japan	Malaysia	Nepal	Pakistan	Philippines	Sri Lanka	Thailand
India	6,770	157		2	2	14	2,018	2,314		316	
Japan	23	3,752	101	74		9	34	19	1,021	17	92

<sup>29</sup> Iran Daily August 1, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> See, Mani, S., "High Skilled Migration from India: Analysis of its Implications", Working Paper, Centre for Development Studies, WP 416 (September 2009), p.33.

Malaysia	252	768	517	3,984	49			33	1,383	9	175
Nepal	1	67	4,025					43		1	
Philippines	2	267	28	17	19		3	3			
Singapore	42	3,043	761	292		1,129		46		6	
Thailand	11	2,301	117	4	66	4	128	16	17	53	

**Source:** Compiled from World Bank, World Development Indicators Database, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>, (accessed October 7, 2011)

The profile of South Asian migrants in these Southeast Asian countries broadly reflects the profile of South Asian migrants to the rest of the world as well as the sectoral and occupational profile of migrant inflows into these Southeast Asian countries. It consists of both low skilled and professional categories of workers and to a limited extent also refugee workers. Labour migrants from South Asia (as well as other Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar) are mostly employed in agriculture, fisheries, construction, domestic service, and factories in Thailand. Rural labour migrant from Bangladesh (locally known as Organ Bangla) are engaged in plantations, construction sites, domestic service and unskilled factory work in Malaysia. Indians, who make up about 8 per cent of the two million registered foreign workers in Malaysia, mainly work in the plantation, construction, information technology and financial services industries in Malaysia. In 2007 alone, 30,916 Indian workers emigrated to Malaysia on Emigration Clearance Required passports, after obtaining clearance from the Protector of Emigrants. Sri Lanka is an important source for domestics in both Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>31</sup>

In recent years, there is also growing skilled migration from South Asia to these Southeast Asian countries, mainly in the IT, financial, engineering, and other professional services sectors. This is part of the “Asia-Pacific” migration system which mainly involves skilled migrants from India, Australia, and developed countries in these markets. The composition and magnitude of these flows has been determined by the demand for workers with specific professional and technical skills in these countries and also their changing national priorities over time, with a bearing on the employment opportunities and the terms and conditions for residence and citizenship in these countries. In Singapore, skilled workers and professionals accounted for 13.4 percent (or about 90,000) of the country’s non-resident population in 2006. Singapore and Malaysia are also attracting a sizeable number of South Asian students who then often stay on to join the labour force in these countries<sup>32</sup>. There is also some refugee migration from some of the South Asian countries.

Table 11 illustrates the presence of South Asian and other migrant workers across a variety of sectors and occupations in Malaysia.

<sup>31</sup> ‘India, Malaysia sign agreement on employment of Workers’ (January 2009). See, Thaindian news, available at [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/india-malaysia-sign-agreement-on-employment-of-workers\\_100137843.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/india-malaysia-sign-agreement-on-employment-of-workers_100137843.html), accessed on November 4, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> There were an estimated 30,000 plus Bangladeshi students studying in Malaysia (The New Straits Times, Kuala Lumpur, August, 18, 2006).



**Table 11: Occupational profile of migrant workers from Southeast and South Asian countries in Malaysia**

Country of origin	Domestic worker	Construction	Manufacturing	Services	Plantation	Agriculture	Total
<b>South Asia</b>							
Bangladesh	12	9,292	36,778	5,375	2,235	1,697	55,389
India	54	9,721	34,685	61,273	27,759	4,454	137,946
Nepal	28	4,597	159,990	20,440	4,736	2,541	192,332
Pakistan	3	3,683	6,441	2,307	289	573	13,296
Sri Lanka	838	166	1,850	138	7	51	3,050
<b>Southeast Asia</b>							
Indonesia	306,598	229,908	210,029	47,191	381,582	33,819	1,209,127
Thailand	448	1,351	921	2,607	280	146	5,753
Myanmar	11	12,636	58,322	15,791	1,348	466	88,574
Philippines	8,912	1,327	2,415	1,594	6,835	611	21,694
<b>Total</b>	<b>320,044</b>	<b>281,432</b>	<b>581,019</b>	<b>159,839</b>	<b>425,815</b>	<b>44,482</b>	<b>1,812,631</b>

**Source:** Dairiam (2006), Table 1, p.4

## 5. Problematic issues in South Asian Migration to Southeast Asia

Migration among Asian countries has been subject to race and gender based discrimination, particularly with regard to low skilled workers and those engaged in occupations which fall outside the purview of host country labour laws. Some of these problems have also characterized migration from South to Southeast Asian countries (Chanda, 2008). Several reports and articles including, Wickramasekara (2002, 2004), Amnesty International (2007), and Castles and Miller (2009) and many other studies discuss the exploitative conditions faced by South Asian migrant domestic workers in Southeast Asian countries, in terms of the wages they receive, the hours they work, and the kind of duties they are required to perform. These studies note the exploitation of South Asian migrant workers by recruitment agencies and intermediaries in these home countries. For instance, Amnesty International (2007) notes that agents charge hefty fees and commissions for placement in overseas jobs, for transport, accommodation, any training they provide, and for passport and work permit fees. Where unregistered agents are involved, the fees charged tend to be higher. South Asian migrants also face problems due to multiple levels of recruiters and brokers who often misinform about the real terms and conditions of employment and even cheat them. Hence, there is discrimination and abuse in both host and home countries, reflecting insufficient government monitoring and control over the recruitment process and sojourn of the employee. The periodic execution of warrants for arrest, deportation, and punishment of clandestine workers in some of these countries only serves to highlight the vulnerability of such workers and the failure of state mechanisms (on both sides) to protect them.

The root of the aforementioned problems has been the institutionalization of international labour migration by these source and destination countries, with their focus on labour exports and imports, respectively. This has created a migration industry on both sides, where there are several layers of intermediaries, including licensed and unlicensed private entrepreneurs, official recruitment and manpower agencies, labour contractors, and brokers, who are engaged in issues of documentation, transport, accommodation, training, orientation, etc. Given the multiple layers and commissions and fees involved, the system has also led to irregular migration. A few examples of issues that have arisen in the context of specific South Asian and Southeast Asian countries highlight the nature of these problems. Interestingly, most of these cases pertain to low skilled, uneducated South Asian workers in Malaysia.

### 5.1 Bangladeshi Workers in Malaysia

According to one ethnographic study, Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia have faced a variety of problems.<sup>33</sup> Often these workers do not receive what they were promised and have to sign new agreements where their salaries are lower than what they were promised and that the terms and conditions of their original contracts (in terms of working hours, overtime pay, entitlement to holidays, basic amenities, and payment on time) are often not met and there is wage discrimination vis a vis local workers. Recruitment agencies have at times provided work permits for companies that do not exist, resulting in deportation of the workers from the airport or their being sent to detention centres. There are also work permit related levies that have to be paid by these workers, in addition to which there are monthly payments for provident fund contributions, which can be claimed only at the end of the work period but are difficult to obtain due to procedural complexities and bureaucratic delays. Bangladeshi workers also face harassment from the police and local groups, despite having legal documents and at times may be sent to detention camps until they pay bribes. Issues of compensation and insurance of workers have also proved problematic with some Bangladeshi workers becoming disabled or injured and receiving no compensation.

Such problems with recruiting agents and employer violations have led to periodic souring of labour relations between the two countries, including a nine year ban on recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in the late 1990s and lifting of this ban in 2006 following pressure from the Bangladeshi government. However, after the Malaysia government agreed to take back around 50,000 Bangladeshi workers in 2006, the recruitment process ran into problems of abuse and cheating due to irregularities on the part of recruiting agencies and rivalries among the manpower agents. In the process the fraudulent ones took advantage of the situation and sent hundreds of workers through arrangements with fake employers in Malaysia. According to newspaper reports, about 500 Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia were kept in confinement

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<sup>33</sup> See, Islam, Md. Saidul *et. al*, "The Unheard Voices Of "Orang Bangla" in Malaysia, *Countercurrents.org*, 20 (October, 2006).

for months in private houses in Kuala Lumpur by their employers.<sup>34</sup> They were grouped into 20 to 25 workers and forced to stay in small rooms and given food only once a day. These workers had paid hefty sums of some Taka 200,000 to secure these jobs. About 300 Bangladeshi workers were cheated by fraudulent recruiting agencies. The Malaysian government reportedly imposed a freeze on the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in December 2007, though this was denied by official sources.<sup>35</sup> In the wake of the global economic crisis in 2008, Malaysia cancelled visas of around 55,000 Bangladeshi workers. Thus, relations between the two countries have undergone many swings in the context of migration.<sup>36</sup>

## 5.2 Indian workers in Malaysia<sup>37</sup>

Similar issues have also arisen in the context of migrant Indian workers in Malaysia. There have been cases where Indian workers have not been paid by their employers and have had to file claims. Entitlements in the form of food allowances, basic housing facilities, and electricity have not been provided by the employers. Employers who are supposed to make applications for timely renewals of visas have not done so, creating uncertainties about the status of these workers, risking their arrest or deportation. Appeals to the Labour Court to allow such workers to seek temporary employment with other employers till their cases are resolved or they are paid their due wages have been seen as lying beyond the court's jurisdiction and a decision in such cases have been left to the Immigration Authorities.<sup>38</sup> Thus workers have been denied their legitimate rights despite having valid contracts with their employer with the consent and approval of the Protector of Emigrants, the Indian Ministry of Labour, and necessary approvals and permits from the Malaysian Immigration Department.<sup>39</sup>

There have been several cases of exploitation of Indian workers in Malaysia. For instance, 15 Indian workers employed in restaurants in Malaysia, sought protection from the Indian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur when their employer failed to pay their wages for 7 months. Their work permits had expired and their passports were with their employers. The Indian

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<sup>34</sup> Available at [http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/search\\_index.php?page=detail\\_news&news\\_id=8283](http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/search_index.php?page=detail_news&news_id=8283), The Financial Express, accessed on 8 September 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Asia Migration Network, 31 May 2006 and 15 July 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Another study which examines the recruitment, employment, and living conditions of Bangladeshi labour working in Singapore similarly finds problems of exploitation, overcharging of fees by intermediaries, and high costs of migration. However, the study provides a more favourable picture about the living and employment conditions, availability of basic amenities and benefits in the case of Singapore compared to Malaysia. There are also some positive initiatives in the case of Singapore, such as the skill promotion test which enables these migrant workers to upgrade their skills and improve their employment opportunities. See, Rahman, Md. Mizanur and L. Fee, "Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Singapore: The View from Inside", *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, Vol. 20, No.1(April 2005), pp. 63-87.

<sup>37</sup> 'Malaysia bans intake of Indian workers', available at <http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Malaysia-bans-intake-of-Indian-workers/259111/>, *Express India*, (January 8, 2008). Accessed on 28 October 2011.

<sup>38</sup> The issues raised in the claim included non-payment and underpayment of wages, wrongful deductions for permits, overtime work without payment, denial of subsistence allowances, and termination of contracts without prior notice.

<sup>39</sup> 'Plight of Indian migrant workers in Malaysia', available at <http://www.hartford-wp.com/archives/54/129.html>. Accessed on November 5, 2011.

High Commission had to intervene on their behalf to help send them back to India. Recruitment of all categories of Indian workers was reportedly suspended by the Malaysian government in December 2007, following protests from the ethnic Indian community over alleged discrimination of Indians vis a vis the Malay majority. Work permits of existing Indian workers were made ineligible for renewal under this ban, according to news reports.<sup>40</sup> The Malaysian government, however, denied these reports.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, overall, there have been problems on both the sending and receiving sides, due to fraudulent practices of recruiting agencies and manpower agents and exploitative practices of employers, and failure to monitor them on either side and to punish the wrongdoers. What has compounded these problems is that these migrant workers have often not had mechanisms to redress discrimination and exploitation or forums to voice their concerns.

## **6. Concluding Thoughts**

Clearly, both Southeast Asia and South Asia feature importantly in the migration landscape within Asia. The migration corridor between these two sub-regions is one of the many migration subsystems in Asia. Migrant flows from South to Southeast Asia consist of both low skilled and skilled migration. Low skilled migration from South Asia to Southeast Asia is present in activities such as housework, agriculture, and construction while skilled migration is prevalent in sectors such as IT, engineering, health, and education services. The main destination markets in Southeast Asia are Singapore and Malaysia.

Evidence suggests, however, that the migration relationship between these two regions has not always been smooth. There have been problems of abuse, exploitation, discrimination, and violation of workers' rights. There have also been problems with inter country coordination, disputes, and lack of institutional mechanisms to manage these flows. These trends underscore the importance of migration management and the need for a coherent approach to coordinating migration flows between the countries in these two sub-regions.

The sequel to this working paper discusses trends in interstate cooperation arrangements between countries in these two sub-regions.

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<sup>40</sup> Some Indian politicians sympathized with ethnic Indians on the grounds that they had been marginalized by the Malay majority government, and criticized the Malaysian government for its crackdown on these protests, resulting in souring of political relations between the two countries. This prompted the reported ban on Indian workers.

<sup>41</sup> 'Malaysia denies banning workers', available at <http://sify.com/news/malaysia-denies-banning-indian-workers-news-national-jegmdwagaie.html>. Accessed on August 12, 2010.