



Photo courtesy of WMC

Migrants' rights advocates meet to discuss migration issues.

### SRI LANKA

*This report was contributed by Migrant Service Center (MSC), Women and Media Collective (WMC), and Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM), with additional information as cited.*

#### Political and Economic Update

**T**he ethnic conflict between the national government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgency in the country has had an extensive impact on Bangladesh society as a whole. A ceasefire agreement entered into by the government and the LTTE from 2002 stopped the fighting, but individual killings of suspected police informants as well as internecine killings by rival rebel groups still

continue, creating a situation of insecurity.

In early 2003 peace talks with the LTTE were progressing in Berlin and Japan, until the LTTE suspended their participation in the talks in April, claiming they were being sidelined. In November, concerns over the handling of the peace talks led to a power struggle in the Sri Lanka government. President Chandrika Kumaratunga suspended parliament for over two weeks and dismissed the defense, interior and information ministers. During this period, the state of emergency undermined the country's political stability and caused the Sri Lankan market to plummet, while the Sri Lankan Central Bank strained to contain the situation and calm the market.

The political struggle continued into 2004. In January, the President's SLFP party aligned with the JVP party to form the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). In February President Kumaratunga dissolved Parliament and called for

early elections in April 2004, three years ahead of schedule. In the April elections, President Kumaratunga's party won 105 of 225 parliamentary seats, eight votes short of an overall majority. This was sufficient to form a government and appoint a cabinet, with Mahinda Rajapakse sworn in as prime minister.

The LTTE also experienced internal conflict in 2004, when Tamil commander Karuna led a split in the rebel movement and went underground with his supporters in March, declaring itself an independent body. This further jeopardized the already fragile peace process, dividing the LTTE into two rival groups and casting doubt on the ability and willingness of the LTTE to continue the talks. In April, however, the LTTE organization subdued the faction in fighting that left up to 30 people dead.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the hundreds of thousands of persons who fled or were forced from their homes due to past and ongoing fighting remains a major concern of the government as well as international organizations. UNHCR estimates 386,104 individuals remained displaced at the end of 2003, and has made repeated calls on the Sri Lankan government to find a long-term solution for these people. Thus far, piecemeal progress has been made; the UNHCR assisted in the repatriation of 13 Sri Lankan refugees from India in February 2004, while 69 Tamil refugees returned in early May. A fire at the Vavuniya refugee camp in February, however, caused around 430 families to lose their homes.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2003 massive floods, the country's worst, killed 256 people and rendered 150,000 homeless. Over 50,000 homes were destroyed, and 300 schools were damaged by the flooding. Government officials estimated the costs of the disaster could amount to



Colorful posters advertise migration-related information.

### DEPARTURES FOR FOREIGN EMPLOYMENT 2002 - 2004\*

Year	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
2002	70,522	34.61	133,251	65.39	203,773
2003	74,508	35.51	135,338	64.49	209,846
2004*	79,979	37.47	133,474	62.53	213,453

\* Provisional

Source: Information Technology Division-SLBFE

tens of millions of dollars. Demonstrating their solidarity, Bangladeshi migrant workers in Riyadh sent over LKR1 million in aid.<sup>3</sup>

With the ceasefire agreement in place, the economy of the country improved as the government's burden of expenditure in an unrelenting conflict was significantly diminished. Some of this progress was reversed, however, during the political instability in late 2003 and early 2004. Interest rates and inflation fell, while the Colombo Stock Exchange rose robustly throughout 2003 until November's political instability. The WTO issued a report assessing Sri Lanka's economic prospects as favorable so long as peace and political stability are maintained and economic reforms continue. Necessary reforms cited in the report include macroeconomic, structural and institutional reforms in taxation, state ownership, the financial system and basic infrastructure. The report also urged that improvement in the services sector was essential.<sup>4</sup>

GDP growth continued the country's recovery trend since the negative growth it experienced in 2001, with GDP rising 4.0% in 2002 and 5.2% in 2003. Growth was primarily driven by the services sector and trade, with exports and imports rising over 9% in the first 10 months of 2003. Increased opportunities for trade and investment, however, have been captured largely by the Western province, which accounts for only 1/10 of the country's population. The rural hinterland, as well as the North and East, are disconnected from the benefits due to lack of adequate economic and social infrastructure facilities.

Poverty in Sri Lanka continues to be a predominantly rural phenomenon with nearly 90% of the poor residing in rural areas. Farmers cultivating small plots of land and casual workers, who account for a large section of the poor, did not benefit from the country's economic growth, and plantation

## Sri Lanka Significant

**2003****January**

SLBFE targets 225,000 job opportunities in the Middle East this year, 80% of which will be available for women.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare confirms plans with Saudi Arabia to regularize the recruitment process for Sri Lankan workers and streamline procedures to work in the kingdom.

**February**

(8) The fifth meeting in the peace process talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam takes place in Berlin.

Foreign Employment Welfare Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardana addresses the issue of the safety of Sri Lankan workers in Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in the event of war by finalizing evacuation plans and funding additional safe houses.

**March**

(21) The Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam hold the sixth session of peace talks at Hakone, Japan.

(31) Sri Lanka opens a training center for immigration officers to build capacity in regard to identifying and responding to trafficking victims.

**April**

Tamil Tigers suspended their participation in peace talks, saying that it would not be attending the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development of Sri Lanka to be held in June.

The SLBFE announce plans to establish a security team at the Bandaranaike International Airport as extra protection to prevent returning migrant workers from being robbed of their savings as they return from abroad.

**May**

(19) Media report that massive flooding in the country's worst-ever floods killed over 200 people.

(24) Reports of over 150,000 people homeless due to the floods bring in over LKR1 million in aid from overseas Sri Lankan workers.

**July**

(1) The Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM) organizes a demonstration involving around 300 migrant workers and their families to celebrate the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families coming into effect, and to push for greater protection of Sri Lankan workers abroad.

The Minister of Employment and Labor announced that a Memorandum of Understanding

will be signed in July with Lebanon in order to improve the working conditions of Sri Lankans working in Lebanon.

**August**

(1) Sri Lankan police arrest a Sri Lankan they believe to be the mastermind behind a human smuggling syndicate, smuggling South Asians including Sri Lankans, Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis aboard his ship to European destinations such as Italy.

The Kuwaiti Embassy in Sri Lanka announce changes to its visa processing system. Job agents will now be allowed to file documents on behalf of visa applicants, no longer requiring private interviews.

**September**

(6) Over 4,000 children of migrant workers will receive government assistance from an annual program which will donate LKR4 million in educational materials, including exercise books.

(7) Lebanon announces plans to repatriate around 300 undocumented Sri Lankan workers as part of an amnesty program between the two countries.

**October**

(7) Parliament passed a bill granting Sri Lankan citizenship to Tamils originally from India which will benefit over 168,000 ethnic Tamils living in Sri

## Events 2003 – June 2004

Lanka.

SLBFE issues a directive to increase protection of Sri Lankan workers in the UAE by requiring garment factories to register with the Sri Lankan office there.

(15) New rules require Sri Lankans working overseas to register with the Bureau of Foreign Employment in their country of work, regardless of employment status.

(31) The LTTE hands over the IA proposals to the GOSL through the Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar in Kilinochchi.

### November

(6) President Kumaratunga declares a state of emergency, suspending parliament for fifteen days and dismissing three ministers, as the peace process was in danger of being jeopardized. Negotiations with LTTE are put on hold.

### December

(2) Papers report that Sri Lanka has signed agreements with 17 countries to facilitate Sri Lankan seafarers to work on foreign ships.

Top Navy and Police officials meet to discuss joint police-navy patrols in the Indian Ocean to prevent Sri Lanka from being used as smuggling transit to countries in Europe, especially Italy.

## 2004

### February

(7) President Chandrika Kumaratunga dissolves Parliament and calls for early elections in April 2004 – three years ahead of schedule.

(28) A fire at Vavuniya refugee camp, home to Tamil villagers displaced by fighting, renders 430 families homeless.

### March

Sri Lanka's Prasad Karivawasam is elected to head the United Nations Committee on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

(15) Sri Lankan Ambassador and Deputy High Commissioner in Chennai pays a visit to the Okkur refugee camp in India which sheltered Sri Lankan refugees, meeting with the refugees, providing birth certificates and assisting with travel arrangements for any wishing to return to Sri Lanka.

LTTE commander Colonel Karuna causes a split in the Tamil Tigers; Karuna reportedly stated he would never be subordinate to rebel chief Velupillai Prabhakaran.

### April

(2) President Kumaratunga's party wins 105 of 225 parliamentary seats, eight seats short of the 113 needed to secure a majority. Candidates backed by the Tamil Tigers win 22 seats.

(6) Mahinda Rajapakse, former opposition leader, is sworn in as new Prime Minister.

264 men who attempted to go to Italy without documentation are sentenced to a one-year jail term and SLR50,000 fine by a Sri Lankan court.

### May

(25-26) UNIFEM and ACILS organize a two-day workshop, "National Laws to Combat Trafficking in South Asia: Sharing of Research Studies" to discuss trafficking-related laws.

### June

(1) Sri Lanka and South Korea sign a bilateral agreement to facilitate Sri Lankans working in South Korea.

Sources:

*BBC News, Scalabrini Asian Migration News*

workers are also considered to be among the poorest, as they receive very low wages. Workers on tea and rubber plantations further suffer from a high degree of economic and social isolation.

Sri Lanka also faces significant challenges due to rising oil costs, lower government revenue, and the cost of reforms. The upcoming termination of the Multi Fiber Agreement in December 2004 threatens its massive apparel sector with looming job losses due to the impending closure of many factories. In 2003, the textile, apparel and leather products sector accounted for 44% of total industrial output; in the event that large numbers of workers lose their jobs due to factory closures, even more Sri Lankans may be forced to consider migration for employment.

### Migration Update

According to Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) figures, it is estimated that the Sri Lankan migrant population working abroad numbered approximately 1.2 million in the year 2003. The Middle East remains the major market for Sri Lankan labor with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar and Lebanon being the most favored destinations. In 2004, 95% of migrant workers registered with the SLBFE were working in that region; according to 2004 data, there were 259,928 Sri Lankan nationals employed in Saudi Arabia, 138,555 in Kuwait and 116,469 in the UAE. In other areas of the world, Sri Lankan migrants were working in Cyprus, Maldives, Hong Kong, Italy and Singapore.

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) continued to ambitiously promote migration, targeting 225,000 jobs in the Middle East in January 2003; 80% of the jobs were aimed at women.<sup>5</sup> The actual number of departures recorded during the year 2003 was 208,803. Although there is an increasing trend shown in male deployment, with the number of men recruited increasing by 9.8% in 2004, the number of female migrants departing for foreign employment is twice that of males. Of all categories of migrant workers, the number of migrants working as domestic workers exceed all others; in 2004, domestic workers accounted for 52% of the total female migrant workers.<sup>6</sup>

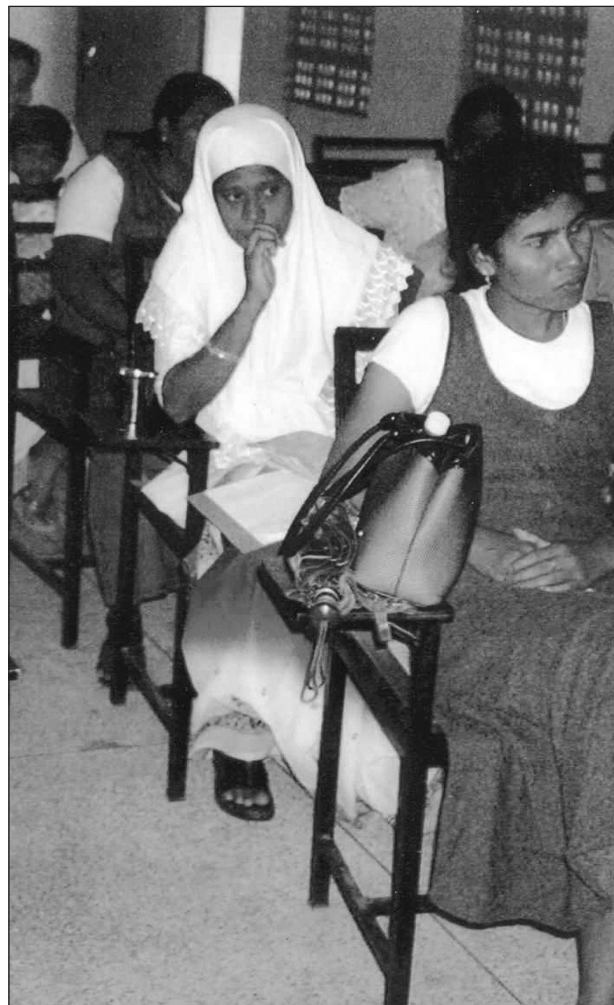


Photo courtesy of WMC

**Sri Lankan migrants attend a training session.**

The SLBFE also worked to improve its services, adding more welfare facilities, including temporary lodging facilities for women arriving at the Bandaranaike International Airport, and announced plans to establish a security team purportedly intended as extra protection for returning migrant workers who may be bringing back large sums in cash.<sup>7</sup> There have been some reports that returning migrant workers have met with harassment as they passed through the airport.<sup>8</sup>

The Bureau also introduced compensation schemes for workers in the event of death or accident while serving in foreign countries.<sup>9</sup> For the year 2002, the government paid out LKR1.4 million in compensation to the dependents of 145 Sri Lankans who died while working overseas.<sup>10</sup> According to the SLBFE, in 2004 it also paid out LKR52 million to migrant workers under its workers insurance

## Case Study: Deepika

When Deepika was 14 years old, she married a casual laborer. She now has a four-year-old son who is attending nursery school.

Deepika's mother and her husband encouraged her to go abroad for employment. Her mother is a returned migrant who had gone abroad for employment twice, once to Dubai for six months and also to Jordan for eleven months. Deepika was sent to Dubai on an open visa on 27 January 2000. Upon arriving in Dubai, she was placed in a house where she was assaulted by the woman of the house. She fainted, and was taken to her employment agency.

The agency then assigned her four houses to clean. Under this arrangement, the employers paid the agency directly, and the agency then paid Deepika. When she complained to the agency that working in four houses offered her no protection, the agency told her that she could only return to Sri Lanka if the return airfare was paid by her family. When she complained to the matron in the agency, she was assaulted with a stick. She was assaulted every time she asked for her wages, and when she said that she was not feeling well enough to work. Deepika was also assaulted with shoes and had her hair pulled by a matron.

Finally she asked a Sri Lanka housemaid working in Dubai to inform her family to send money for the airline ticket, and on 3 December 2000, she was sent back to Sri Lanka. She received no money at all for her work. She had paid LKR16,400 to the agency in Sri Lanka through a sub-agent.



policy. A new rule took effect on 15 October 2003 requiring Sri Lankans to register with the SLBFE in their host countries, with employers to provide details regarding employment insurance benefits before submitting employment contracts to the Sri Lankan embassy.<sup>11</sup>

Early 2003 brought serious concerns for Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East as it appeared increasingly likely that the US would invade Iraq. Employment and Labor Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe stated that around 300 Sri Lankans were employed in Iraq, while over 500,000 Sri Lankans were working in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait at the time.<sup>12</sup> In the event of emergency, government officials finalized evacuation plans and funded additional safe houses in Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Migrant workers continue to face considerable hardship while working abroad: the SLBFE reported that the number of complaints it received in 2004 amounted to 4.5% of the total recruitment. In addition, 245 deaths were recorded by the SLBFE in 2004, a 12.9% increase over 2003. There were continued reports of Sri Lankans experiencing abuses in the Middle East, with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Labor reporting that it received 25,228 complaints of

harassment and non-payment of wages from Sri Lankan domestic workers in the Middle East. One well-publicized incident involved 38 Sri Lankan garment factory workers in Sharjah, UAE.<sup>13</sup> These workers did not receive their pay for several months, despite efforts to reach a settlement with the factory owner. The Sri Lankan Consulate in Dubai provided the workers with support, while the SLBFE created a welfare fund; the workers continue to fight for their wages. Many migrant workers with employment problems, however, end up in detention camps. The SLBFE worked to repatriate a number of Sri Lankan female employees stranded in Middle East detention centers in 2004. In March, 78 Sri Lankan domestic workers were flown home from Saudi Arabia at the SLBFE's expense.<sup>14</sup> The workers were reported to have ended up in the centers due to employment problems or for overstaying their visas.

According to Yasanjalee Devika, a senior lecturer at the University of Sri Jayewardenapura, 64% of Sri Lankan domestic workers who were employed in the Middle East returned empty handed. At a seminar conducted by the Movement to Protect Migrant Workers, Devika said that 25 out of 50 domestic workers take out loans at exorbitant interest rates, the repayment of which eats up much

## Case Study: Lakshmi\*

Lakshmi's husband deserted her, leaving her without any income and with two children to care for. She was struggling and had no one to support her.

Simon\* was a sub-agent who worked freelance for several recruiting agencies. One day he visited Lakshmi, saying, "Sister, I feel so sad to see your pitiable condition. I can help you to go abroad. My wife is working as a migrant in the Middle East. She can arrange to bring you over. You can earn good money and you can pay back your debts and send money for the children."

He persisted, and finally she agreed. She sold her valuables and borrowed more money to pay the agents' fee of LKR18,000. One day he took her to Colombo in order to get her passport undergo for a medical examination. She got a passport in one day. During the medical examination she was asked to get a Depo Provera injection to prevent conception, as this was one of the requirements to go abroad. It was nightfall by the time they finished with their errands in Colombo, and Simon suggested that she stay in a hotel.

That night, he raped her. She was afraid and did not cry out. In the morning they returned to the village. She was greatly ashamed, and was now afraid that she had lost her money and her future.

Within two months, however, she was sent abroad, and Simon's wife met her at the airport. She told Lakshmi that the employer she was to work for had gone away on holiday. Simon's wife assured her that she would make arrangements for Lakshmi in the meantime.

Simon's wife was actually running a brothel. Lakshmi was unwilling to do sex work, but endured life in this agency for two weeks. All the time she wept and complained to Simon's wife, who then found Lakshmi a job with another employer. Lakshmi's employer was not only kind to her, but also paid her wages regularly. Lakshmi returned to Sri Lanka after two years. Upon her return, Lakshmi decided to unburden her secret of what happened to her, but did not want to make a complaint. She was ashamed of what happened to her, and was also afraid of Simon.



\*The names have been changed to protect the identity of the persons in this story.

if not all of their savings from working abroad.<sup>15</sup> Devika went so far as to suggest the government rethink its policy of deployment of workers, although this is unlikely considering Sri Lanka's heavy dependency on migrant workers' remittances. Foreign exchange earnings data indicate migrant workers brought in LKR136,446 million in 2003, comprising 27.5% of the foreign exchange earnings of the country.<sup>16</sup> According to SLBFE data, Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East alone have remitted over LKR350 million since 2000.

A survey conducted by the Migrant Services Centre in association with the Department of Sociology at the University of Colombo in 2003 validate to some extent the view that female labor migration is largely poverty-driven, with migrants who come from socially vulnerable sectors and are therefore highly susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Only 37.35% of the surveyed population had attained

a secondary education, while 71% of them had been housewives until the time they migrated overseas. Only 4.15% had any technical or professional background; the majority of respondents had a low level of education and were from rural or plantation areas. The poor social picture of female migrants painted by the survey appeared to be further accentuated by the fact that 93% worked in countries notorious for cultural and institutional conditions disfavoring women. Nearly a fourth (23.1%) had suffered physical injuries in the course of being employed abroad due to a variety of reasons including accidents at work and physical abuse.

Of the entire sample, 26.28% stated that their travel abroad for work had negative effects on their family lives. Of these, 27.1% stated that it led to divorce or separation from their spouse. Others mentioned their husbands' addiction to alcohol, while a few reported experiencing domestic strife,



Photo courtesy of WMC

**Prospective migrants participate in awareness raising activities.**

indebtedness and depression among family members.

### ***Trafficking***

There is a growing volume of evidence that trafficking takes place in Sri Lanka in a rather rampant manner concomitant with labor migration. Trafficked persons are mostly females from rural areas with low levels of education. Women from dysfunctional families appear to be among the most vulnerable since they are often destitute and have no visible support groups to assist them. There are serious gaps in the legal framework at present. Although these gaps have been identified, follow-up action is slow, due probably to the lack of political will and low priority given by the government. Traffickers are sometimes local people, and include not only men but women as well, who act in collusion with corrupt officials.

As many as 50 awareness raising workshops have

been held in 2003 and 2004 in many locations in urban areas and rural areas to educate civil society about the process of trafficking, the common strategies used by trafficking, and how to prevent trafficking. Sri Lanka also established a training center for immigration officers to build their capacity in regard to identifying and responding to the needs of trafficking victims. In some areas, community vigilance groups have already been set up.

### ***Smuggling***

Smuggling has emerged as a serious problem in Sri Lanka. The country has become a sending and transit country for people who attempt to go to European destinations such as Italy for employment without documentation. Numerous young people attempt to cross over to Italy by fishing trawlers, many of which are over-crowded. These sea journeys are organized by smuggling rings who earn large sums of money. Although a few do reach Italy, many are arrested by the police and imprisoned. A number of such incidents were reported in 2004, with Egyptian authorities intercepting a boat with 54 Sri Lankans attempting to enter Italy early in the year, while Weligama police arrested another 38 in June.<sup>17</sup> Such migrants are generally deported and face charges of violation of the Immigration and Emigration Act upon their return. In early 2004, 264 men were sentenced to one-year prison terms and a LKR50,000 fine for attempting to go to Italy without documentation.<sup>18</sup> There also is great risk to people who travel through smuggling rings; for example, nearly 500 people who allegedly paid LKR150,000 each for jobs and transport to Italy were instead taken to Dubai by plane in several groups and then sent to Somalia.<sup>19</sup> A large number of these people are still being held in Somalia.

Sri Lankan authorities are aware of the problem, however. The country's Criminal Investigation Department has set up a special branch to focus on smuggling,<sup>20</sup> while top navy and police officials met in December 2003 to discuss joint police-navy patrols.<sup>21</sup> The Criminal Investigations Department, meanwhile, is investigating a potential racket at Sri Lanka's international airport involving forged passports.

## DEPARTURES FOR FOREIGN EMPLOYMENT BY COUNTRY AND SEX 2000 - 2004\*

Country	2000		2001		2002		2003		2004*	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Saudi Arabia	26,161	35,198	26,672	40,013	27,622	43,868	25,812	50,283	23,893	46,998
Kuwait	5,340	28,293	6,041	29,059	6,686	35,156	6,770	31,853	7,039	29,494
U.A.E.	10,346	22,469	9,169	19,122	12,538	20,355	14,362	17,955	15,468	17,243
Lebanon	443	12,752	442	14,993	423	12,269	356	12,851	376	17,442
Jordan	383	6,971	447	7,629	388	6,146	520	6,562	1,177	7,722
Qatar	9,350	2,787	11,169	2,884	17,153	3,591	18,700	5,098	24,877	4,972
Oman	1,284	3,680	1,266	2,403	1,335	2,243	1,546	2,585	1,618	1,789
Bahrain	1,484	4,993	948	2,790	948	3,578	1,179	2,552	966	2,833
Cyprus	448	1,891	639	2,451	681	2,412	625	2,418	501	2,622
Maldives	2,078	977	1,727	665	1,500	1,395	2,090	1,103	2,111	343
Singapore	147	1,470	229	1,278	112	1,158	85	984	123	855
South Korea	654	201	280	73	421	101	1,798	238	1,182	122
Hong Kong	22	352	12	370	3	267	6	222	8	154
Malaysia	1,165	39	185	151	99	282	30	209	30	211
Mauritius	47	24	26	78	46	113	73	112	57	296
Egypt	22	77	21	36	6	60	10	108	14	147
Israel	1	8	4	20	21	38	21	37	34	72
Greece	90	49	96	55	78	63	25	30	54	31
Kenya	4	1	21	5	14	18	21	3	8	3
United Kingdom	8	1	5	15	18	11	12	20	4	25
Syria	10	18	5	21	5	12	7	20	8	30
Seychelles	33	4	21	3	100	0	119	9	48	4
Pakistan	15	15	15	11	13	15	18	9	27	14
Ireland	0	0	16	4	39	8	25	6	9	1
Italy	115	68	22	6	6	1	1	5	15	1
North Yemen	1	6	1	3	3	3	11	5	6	-
South Yemen	9	12	13	6	8	4	35	3	6	8
South Africa	15	3	41	16	26	7	14	3	44	11
Libya	16	0	101	0	114	3	54	4	34	1
Brunei	15	4	10	4	1	2	5	5	4	1
United States	36	5	26	4	3	4	1	2	2	3
China	2	0	24	1	2	1	9	2	5	1
Madagascar	0	0	21	0	2	0	13	-	2	-
Japan	8	0	20	3	0	2	1	-	3	-
Uganda	2	0	0	1	4	0	16	6	-	-
Others	39	27	72	27	104	65	138	35	226	35
Total	59,793	122,395	59,807	124,200	70,522	133,251	74,508	135,337	79,979	133,484

\*Provisional  
Source: Information Technology Division-SLBFE

## Responses

### Government

The Sri Lankan government made efforts throughout 2003 and 2004 to ink agreements promoting migration, particularly in the Middle East. In January 2003, the government confirmed plans with Saudi Arabia to regularize the recruitment process for Sri Lankan workers and streamline procedures to work in the Kingdom. Later in the year, it announced plans for an MOU to be signed with Lebanon in order to improve the working conditions of Sri Lankans.<sup>22</sup> The Kuwaiti Embassy in Sri Lanka also announced changes to its visa processing system to dispense with the private interview requirement so that employment agencies can file applications directly on behalf of visa applicants.<sup>23</sup>

Further, the media reported in December 2003



Posters provide information on International Migrants' Day activities.

that Sri Lanka has signed agreements with 17 countries to facilitate Sri Lankan seafarers to work on foreign ships.<sup>24</sup> On 1 June 2004, Sri Lanka and South Korea signed a bilateral agreement on the deployment of Sri Lankan workers to South Korea.<sup>25</sup>

The government also introduced a scheme whereby about 750,000 Sri Lankan migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Lebanon will receive foreign insurance.<sup>26</sup> The SLBFE issued a directive intended to protect Sri Lankans working in garment factories in the UAE; garment factories intending to employ Sri Lankan migrant workers must register with the SLBFE to assist the bureau in monitoring the workers' situation.<sup>27</sup>

In Sri Lanka, the SLBFE conducts pre-departure mandatory training programs, along with the Migrant Service Centre. One training session is a 12-day course provided to would-be domestic workers going to the Middle East. There is also another 21-day training program for domestic workers who are going to Singapore, Cyprus, Hong Kong, and similar destinations. The training includes counseling, vocational training skills, health and welfare, information on travel documents, problem solving and reintegration. Although the training is cited as a good practice, local NGOs say the programs still need to improve in techniques of training methodology.

The government also carried out other programs, ranging from handing out travel bags to departing migrant workers<sup>28</sup> to an annual government assistance program donating LKR4 million in educational materials to the children of migrant workers.<sup>29</sup>

Many NGOs in Sri Lanka feel that the SLBFE, established in 1985, is inadequate and obsolete, and believe that the bureau should be replaced with an improved Overseas Employment Authority with more provisions to protect migration through bilateral and multilateral agreements with receiving countries.

### IGOs

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in association with the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) organized a regional workshop on "National Laws to Combat Trafficking in South Asia: Sharing of Research Studies" in May 2003. Participants in the workshop, representing India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, presented and discussed research studies regarding regulations relating to trafficking. UNIFEM has been working on this issue of trafficking in women and children with the governments, NGOs, and other agencies in South Asia. The IOM in Colombo launched an awareness raising campaign in November on the dangers of irregular migration throughout the country, and held a workshop on labour migration policies and legal labour migration opportunities.<sup>30</sup> IOM also provided training centers with modern household equipment to assist in the training of domestic workers. In addition, IOM funds a training center for immigration officers.<sup>31</sup>

**NGOs**

Several organizations in Sri Lanka continue to be the principal providers of services to migrant workers, such as the Migrant Services Center (MSC), Women and Media Collective (WMC), and the Action Network for Migrants (ACTFORM), a network of several organizations working on migrant issues. Also, the MSC has organized 26 migrant workers associations in six of the nine provinces which have a high density of migrants.

The American Center for International Labor Solidarity and the WMC support activities that promote migrant rights. Among the activities have been media campaigns to highlight the needs of migrants. There have been banners placed in prominent locations in the city of Colombo, calling for the protection of the rights of migrant workers. There was also a small pocket calendar containing details on the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants and Members of Their Families (MWC) which was widely distributed including to migrant workers themselves. Posters telling migrant workers about their rights and about what measures to take to protect their rights were disseminated to government offices including at the local government level where migrant workers have to go in order to get their documentation. An information booklet for migrant workers also providing information about their rights and of what steps to take to ensure their own safety has been prepared and is ready for broad dissemination.

The MWC refers complaints from migrant workers to relevant labor, medical, legal and other authorities. It handled approximately 80 complaints in the period under review. Among the complaints received are: rape and sexual harassment (8); insurance fraud (30); agencies and sub agency fraud (25); and state inaction (15).

ACTFORM also organized a demonstration to celebrate the MWC coming into effect. Around 300 migrant workers and their families attended the event, pushing for increased protection of Sri Lankan migrant workers.

The MSC held eight workshops in 2003 for recruiting agents and sub-agents. In the course of the workshops valuable information came to light in terms of the activities of licensed agents, unlicensed

agents and sub-agents. Although many of the licensed agents are reliable and honest in their dealings, they leave room for others to exploit potential migrants by charging excessive placement fees. There was also information that agents sent migrants abroad using false documents. Some licensed agents actively participate in contract substitutions and violations and other such vices leaving the migrants at the mercy of the employers.

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**Endnotes**

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