

Background Information on Migrant Workers *by Irene Fernandez*

Global population movement though an age old phenomenon has indeed taken on new and challenging dimensions during the last 20 years. Of the more than 100 million people estimated to live outside their country of origin, about 18 million are refugees and more than 30 million are Asian migrants working in other countries. Such a reality exists because current globalization strategies, restructuring of economies and the international division of labor favor migrant labor. The process of being absorbed into the global process has also brought about a disintegration of the social order and growing inequalities among peoples and nations. Poverty, conflicts, environmental degradation and catastrophe and forced displacement of communities have significantly changed migration processes. The cheap, flexible, contractual and deregulated labor by capital has also brought about highly organized recruitment of labor across borders. More and more migrants, especially women migrants are displacing themselves individually on a short term basis and maintaining their permanent place of stay and family obligations back home.

Malaysia, one of the tiger economies in Asia, depends very heavily on migrant labour to meet its economic growth especially its strategy of becoming a newly industrialized nation. At present there are more than 2 million foreign workers in the country. Most of them are engaged in the 3-D jobs (Dirty, Demanding and Dangerous) shunned by Malaysians. The Malaysian government has recognized that its efforts to energize and inject economic growth can only be achieved through a hard working labor force that is cheap and controlled. This has been the proven factor during the last 15 years where over 3 million migrant workers have immensely contributed to the economic boom enjoyed in the country. Its pride of the twin towers as the tallest building in the world or its highly modernized airport were all constructed with the sweat and blood of migrant workers. This includes a significant number, more than a million

undocumented workers. Thousands of these workers had been trafficked into the country through illegal channels with support from enforcement agencies and personnel. It is not surprising that Malaysia recruits labor from 12 countries in Asia while yearly being challenged with a rapid increase of undocumented and trafficked women and men.

In recognizing the changing patterns in migration, the migrant worker is no more male; a professional or one from a better off family. The migrant worker is more and more a female even from countries that tried to stop flow of women in migration. The migrant worker is coming from the remotest villages of our countries with the least exposure and lower education levels and skills. The new migrant is younger and younger with even children now entering as migrant labor.