

Manila Conference on Labor migration

Opening Remarks of Tissa Abeywickrama, Director General, Sri Lanka Red Cross

Chairperson of session on; “Human face of migration”

Thanking the Senator Gordon, and the members and staff of Philippine Red Cross for the warm welcome and welcoming the Secretary General of IFRC, chairing the 2nd session of the first day “Human Face of Migration” Mr. Tissa Abeywickrama made the following remarks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Human Face of Migration is indeed a thought-provoking and extremely relevant topic. For over tens of thousands of years people (human) have been migrating to every habitable part of the world. This is evident from archeological and scientific findings. In Sri Lanka scientists have found evidence of two human habitats dating more than 30,000 years. These migrants could have only had challenges from the environment and the nature.

I think all of us in this room would proudly describe ourselves as humanitarians – which by definition means ‘a person actively engaged in promoting human welfare.’ We see the world through the lens of people – how can we help others? How can we contribute to a better human existence? But unfortunately, we are often disappointed by many around us who do not always follow people-first approach. Money, power, politics, personal gain and nationality often come before any action that brings help to a person in need. We can find examples of this in the many conflicts and humanitarian emergencies around the world.

When it comes to the issue of migration, and in our context, labour migration – we as humanitarians often come up against the same obstacles. The issue of migration – the movement of people from one country to another - of course can be considered to have socioeconomic and political implications.

Labour migration is an important source of income for sending governments and a lucrative business for recruitment agents etc. But is that all, isn't the recipient governments and various business in those countries too are benefitted. The media too often likes to focus on the drama or use big numbers and terminology that often detract from the very individual human heart of the migration story.

A recent example is “Major emergency as boat capsizes” made by BBC. Where someone has circled and replaced “boat capsizes” with “Many lives feared, lost at sea” and replaced “Migrants” with “people” which clearly exhibit the frustration and disagreement for categorizing people just as migrants;

Our job as humanitarians is to assist, protect and support people in need. And in line with the fundamental principles of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, we help people regardless of background, ethnicity, religion or race. And contrary to popular belief, the Red Cross Red Crescent is not just focused on helping people affected by conflict and natural disasters, we aim to help anyone in need of humanitarian assistance, in whatever context. Assisting migrant communities – be they asylum seekers, refugees or migrant workers at home or abroad- is an issue of an increasing priority for the Red Cross Red Crescent.

I believe it is our responsibility to ensure governments, decision makers, employers, host communities and the media really do see 'The Human Face' of labour migration and that they have the will, the knowledge and resources to help the most vulnerable.

From my perspective as a Sri Lankan – a key sending country – I am very curious to hear more about the support and protection services that are essential to ensuring the safety and dignity of migrant workers. From my understanding, migrant workers often lack access to healthcare and support services in host countries. In 2015 and against the backdrop of the rapidly increasing number of labour migrants, it surely seems unrealistic to turn a blind eye to the human needs of labour migrants? What role as humanitarians can we play to improve this?

I'm also interesting in exploring the issue of perception. How are labour migrants perceived by entities such as the government, by employers, by host communities? Is it time for humanitarian organizations to step up their communications to stamp out prejudice and intolerance? Can we play more of a role in changing behavior and mindsets?

Also when a married female leaves for foreign employment, the family unit can become dysfunctional without the wife and the mother. What can we do to protect the bonding of the family unit?

All interesting and complex issues to discuss and Tissa Abeywickrama handed over the floor to moderator Divya and the distinguished panel of speakers.