

Illegal migration

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The incidence of illegal migration from Pakistan is increasing progressively despite stern vigilance and action by the authorities responsible for ensuring authorised, documented and safe migration.

Prompted by circumstances and dreams for a better tomorrow, the underprivileged class of Pakistani youth, particularly those from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are influenced by agents/human smugglers and so end up opting for migration to countries that cannot be reached through legal means. The economically deprived segment of our society is the target audience and victim of human smugglers and traffickers across Pakistan.

The recent reports on stranded Pakistanis in Turkey are one such example where the families of those Pakistani migrant workers were forced to pay heavy sums as ransom. There may be many cases of migrants' disappearance that are un-reported by the media or by their families. A large number of the total population of Pakistan is made up of the youth. This highlights the need for formulating programmes and policies at the national level for the gainful deployment of our youth in industry by maximising their potential for productivity.

Though the government of Pakistan as well as our provincial governments have a number of skill development initiatives focusing on refining skills in core areas, due to lack of coordination between various skill development organisations, the desired results have not been achieved. There are around 500,00-800,000 Pakistani workers that go annually to various countries for employment – largely to the Middle East and Gulf region – through a net-

work of registered overseas employment promoters which use a legal framework for their work.

The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BE&OE) is responsible for registering and documenting every Pakistani sent abroad using legal ways of migration through the network of registered OEPs or through direct employment. The major portion of Pakistani workforce is sent to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia-KSA followed by the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. However, those using illegal channels for migration concentrate on European countries and seek settlement through political asylum or through other country-specific settlement incentives/policies.

During my stint leading the only sending agency in the public sector, I witnessed a number of cases of prospective job seekers for employment or settlement in Europe or elsewhere being deceived by a network of illegal recruiting agents/human smugglers and traffickers on heavy payments. This unauthorised and undocumented migration of people across national borders violates the immigration laws of the destination country and migrants end up with nothing except jail terms or deportations – and that too only if they live to reach their destination countries.

The FIA is the core government agency under the Ministry of Interior responsible for looking into issues pertaining to illegal migration, human smuggling and trafficking in the country. The agency has greatly contributed to getting the desired results but, due to a limited resource base, the issues pertaining to illegal migration, human smuggling and trafficking are too difficult to deal with in their entirety.

International foreign agencies like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have contributed greatly in helping

relevant government deal with the issue through sharing information and experience. Consultative dialogues and frequent deliberation among stakeholders have facilitated efforts for ensuring and devising a roadmap for future strategies. The non-availability of data on the total number of illegal Pakistani workers abroad and the number of Pakistani workers deported by foreign governments has hampered the formulation of future strategies to overcome the ever-increasing problem of irregular migration from Pakistan.

To ensure data collection, and its accuracy, the government and the relevant agencies will have to allocate sizeable physical and financial resources to upgrade the existing systems in place in line with international standards. Since migration has territorial, ethnic and cultural impacts on the sending and receiving countries, a collective national effort to check illegal migration is needed. Although all-out efforts by the government and its relevant agencies to deal with the organised nexus of illegal agents are there, cases are being regularly reported of illegal movement of Pakistanis who use our bordering counties to enter into Europe and elsewhere.

With a view to address the issues of the employability of the Pakistani youth, the government will have to create an environment whereby the unemployed and unguided youth are gainfully employed locally in industry. It is equally important to excessively sensitise the issue in print, electronic and social media. We also need government-level interventions to deal with and curb the growing curse of human smuggling and trafficking in the country.

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