

**Fourth Ministerial Consultation on
Colombo Process -Inaugural Session**

Statement by

H E Sheikh Hasina

Hon'ble Prime Minister

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Excellencies,
Director General of the International Organisation for Migration
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum and very good morning to you all.

I welcome you all to the Fourth Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia.

This gathering of the major labour originating countries of Asia, which collectively accounts for the largest movement of people, is a timely event. It takes place when there is critical need for increased cooperation amongst us to face the growing challenges of increased volume and pace of migration, combined with rapidly changing economic, political and demographic dimensions of our globalized world.

It is estimated that over 2.5 million Asian workers annually leave their countries to work abroad. They contribute to the economic development and well being of their host countries. They also contribute to their own countries socio-economic development with their remittances and also their newly acquired skills on returning home. In 2009, their global remittances estimated at USD 414 billion, of which over USD 316 billion went to developing countries such as Bangladesh.

In many countries, the contribution of migrant workers surpasses other sectors in socio-economic development. In Bangladesh, they are leading contributors to our national development. Remittances were over \$10 billion in 2010, despite the global economic downturn and subsequent fall in labour migration. Today, remittance is the second largest source of foreign exchange earning for Bangladesh, accounting for about 11% of our GDP. My government has identified this as a thrust sector.

As I express my gratitude to the millions of Bangladeshi migrant workers, I also thank the host countries for providing them with opportunities to work and to improve their lives. I also believe the Colombo Process would continue to facilitate cooperation for safe and orderly labour migration for the benefit of countries of origin and destination, as well as of labour migrants and their families. I am pleased to learn that destination countries have joined us today. We greatly welcome their desire to engage and collaborate.

I am pleased with the meeting's theme "Migration with Dignity". It is most apt, for while we celebrate the growth of labour migration from the region, we need to ensure that the migrants move to and serve in their countries of destination in dignity. I say this because of our awareness of the woes and sufferings which many migrants face. Although we are all helping in minimizing these and other challenges, even one account of their suffering, including in the recruitment process, is one too many.

It is true we have made significant progress in these areas in the last decade. However, we are still far from the ideal scenario of 'Migration with Dignity'. Therefore, it is my hope that this meeting will bring us a step closer to developing an effective migration management system for the labour sending countries in Asia, and also provide us with some concrete ideas for

promoting and protecting labour migrants abroad. Indeed, Bangladesh is honoured to host this important Colombo Process initiative.

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

For many of the labour sending countries in the region, including Bangladesh, unethical recruitment practices are a major challenge. Many potential migrants from Bangladesh see overseas employment as a way out of poverty and in their desperation are taken advantage of by unscrupulous middlemen who charge exorbitant amounts to secure their employment and process necessary documents; and at times, the jobs provided do not adhere to proper work terms and conditions.

Regulating and monitoring recruitment is a challenging task. More so, as it concerns international movement not fully controlled by national governments alone. Bangladesh has a range of measures to regulate recruitment agencies and protection mechanisms for the migrant workers. These need to be stringently implemented not only in Bangladesh but also in the host countries where similar regulations and mechanisms exist to enable safe and transparent recruitment process.

Closely linked is the exorbitant migration cost incurred by migrant workers. We have, therefore, formed an expert committee to identify the cost determinants at all stages of migration and to come to a consensus on what the maximum migration costs should be. We are also instituting soon ceilings on travel costs to various destinations. I hope that the Expatriates' Welfare Bank to be inaugurated today, will contribute to bringing down the migration cost, especially costs which are incurred to fund the migration process.

Here, given the multi-faceted and cross-border aspects of migration costs, it would be important to take collective action to help regulate and combat unethical recruitment practices. This is where the Colombo Process could be used by labour sending and destination countries in sharing good practices and exchanging views on our collective concerns, including issues of minimum wage, acceptable working conditions, minimum contractual period, health benefits and general welfare and so on.

Dear Participants,

I am indeed happy that the Fourth Ministerial Consultation will discuss these vital issues related to migrant workers. I am also happy to learn that a roundtable discussion will be held on possible ways to respond to emergency situations. This is important in the light of the recent migration crisis from Libya, which has affected many of the countries, including Bangladesh. The Libyan crisis has made it clear of the need to have effective contingency planning and mechanisms to deal with such complex emergencies.

In Libya, migrant workers and other third country nationals were the first victims of the unrest as employers evacuated or shut down factories due to rising violence. Many returned home without their documents, personal possessions, and most importantly, without their pay and meager savings. Over 35,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers have been repatriated from the bordering areas of Libya since the beginning of the unrest in late February, and new arrivals continue to be registered.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all associated international humanitarian agencies that were instrumental in responding rapidly in a very difficult situation. The IOM deserves particular mention in this respect, and I wish to thank IOM, especially its dedicated team in Bangladesh. We hope to work closely with them in the next phase, that is, in putting together effective reintegration programmes to ensure sustainable livelihood options for the large number of the returnees.

I hope that we will have from this meeting some good recommendations on a viable institutionalized response to respond to such emergencies, and for the sustainable reintegration of affected migrants.

Dear Guests,

I would be remiss if I do not touch upon another important issue - that of women migration. The vulnerability of migrants is often compounded when they are employed in low skilled sectors - this is particularly true for women labour migrants. Over the last decade, migration in Asia has become increasingly feminized with a growing number of women migrating independently from this region. Gender implications of migration however, still remain a poorly understood and researched area.

Female migrants are primarily employed in informal sectors as housekeeping and care giving. In addition to the challenges faced by migrants in general, women, due to the informal and restricted nature of their jobs, are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. In sectors as housekeeping, women migrants often deal with isolation, long working hours and limited leisure time. Yet they contribute greatly to their countries of origin, often being more reliable than their male counterparts in sending remittances.

It is very important that we dedicate separate attention to ensuring that women migrants have all the necessary protection while they serve abroad.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is imperative for all the countries represented here to sustain and enhance the growth of beneficial migration in a protective environment throughout the migration process, particularly for those migrant workers from this region. Here the "International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families" is significant in providing the normative framework and guidelines to facilitate the promotion and protection of migrants' rights.

The Convention, however, has been ratified by only 37 countries. Only few countries in South Asia, which has, otherwise, a good record of enforcing most of the important international instruments, have ratified this Convention. Bangladesh is one of them. Our decision to ratify the Convention came from our belief that protection of migrant worker's rights must start at home. We cannot leave it as responsibility of destination countries alone, but of the sending countries as well.

Bangladesh, with the ratification of the Convention, will be able to ensure protection and dignity of all our migrants venturing out for employment overseas. Here, I would also reiterate that migration management and the protection of migrant workers will require a collective and consolidated effort. This is a necessity for Asia which has the largest mobility of people. The Colombo Process we feel provides that platform for regional collaboration and partnership.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The problems of exploitation and malpractices in labour migration process, high migration cost, involvement in low skilled and unregulated sectors, ignorance of the labour migrants, are issues common in many of our countries. Efforts are on by us all to address some of these challenges, but clearly we are yet to reach the desired goal of migration with dignity. I hope this meeting will conclude successfully with some practical and bold recommendations aimed at addressing the problems.

I also hope that the conclusions would provide the necessary impetus for collaborative efforts to address some of the issues which have often not received adequate attention. I wish to conclude by extending a warm welcome to you all and hope that together we will be able to ensure migration with dignity for all. It is now my pleasure to declare open the Fourth Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia (Colombo Process).

I wish you all successful deliberations and a fruitful outcome of your consultations.

Let me also have the privilege of opening the new 'Probashi Kallyan' Bank (Expatriates Welfare Bank) - a bank dedicated to the service of migrant workers of Bangladesh. The Bank will

provide collateral free soft term loans, banking services as easy remittance transfers at low cost, for migrant workers.

I hope it will be able to prove itself as an effective instrument to facilitate reintegration of returnee workers and help them undertake new enterprises for their livelihood upon return. I am confident that the Bank will also prove to be a good example for other labour-sending countries in the region.

I thank you.

Khoda Hafez
Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu
May Bangladesh Live Forever.

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