

Speech delivered on 6th May 2014 by Hon. Dilan Perera, Chair-in-Office, Colombo Process and Minister of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare

It is the tenth year since the establishment of the Colombo Process. It is with deep sense of humility that I have accepted the privilege of being its current Chair-in-Office. The Colombo Process is a grouping of eleven, short term migrant labour sending countries of Asia. These countries are the first leg in the supply chain of human resources, targeted primarily for employment in the Middle-East.

The short term migration industry is a mega-trend in world development, unknown to the Washington Consensus. The World Bank, estimated that for 2013, the remittance income to countries from migrant labour, touched US Dollars 450 Billion, sent by about 215 million migrant workers. This is expected to top US Dollars 530 Billion by 2016. The remittance income far exceeds Official Development Assistance and Foreign Direct Investment. Of this, about 50% come to Asian countries, with China, having a remittance income of US Dollars 67 Billion, and India, with a remittance income of US Dollars 65 Billion. Both head the world list. The Philippines, with a remittance income of US Dollars 20 Billion, is the fourth. All three are members of the Colombo Process and are represented here. Other members of the Colombo Process also received significant remittances, their weight in their GDP ranging from 8% to 12%. While remittances are a world mega-trend, it is a significant mini-trend, in each of the Colombo Process countries. It dominates the sectoral classification, and is a significant lever in poverty alleviation.

The emerging significance of remittance contributing, short term migrant workers to the world economy, was given recognition in 1990. At the

Cairo conference, many proposals were made. Short term migrant workers, were the commodity equivalent, with a human face, of primary products, all produced in the developing countries. Since 1965, it was evident that the terms of trade for primary products were receiving a short shrift in world trade. Consequently, the UNCTAD was created, much against the wishes of the developed world. UNCTAD has instituted a number of remarkable measures, to re-balance the exploitation of primary commodities, by the developed world.

Short term migrant workers, the human equivalent of primary products, needed a similar institutional mechanism. Consequently, in 2006, under strong pressure of Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, the first High Level Dialogue was convened by the U.N. Among other issues discussed, was the necessity for an international institutional arrangement to attend to the needs of migrant workers. Three alternatives were proposed.

The first was to establish a new UN body, like the UNCTAD, for migrant workers.

The second, was to widen the scope of existing UN bodies, to cover issues of migrant workers. Both were rejected.

The third was, to establish a non-UN body, composed of sovereign States. This was accepted.

This body was called the Global Fund for Migration and Development (GFMD). It was supported by an existing organization, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which undertook implementation of GFMD initiatives. At the recently concluded UN Second High Level

Dialogue, convened by Mr. Ban-ki-Moon, the initiatives of both the GFMD and IOM to support migrant workers were strongly commended.

The GFMD does not have the clout of a UN body. Yet, there is a need for attending to issues of migrant workers at international level. The IOM developed a concept of Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs), which are informal State led dialogue groups, whose conclusions are not binding. There are territorial RCPs like the Colombo Process, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, and there are thematic RCPs, like the Bali Process, which deals with drugs, forced migration etc. A discussion of the RCPs is on the Agenda of this SOM.

It is appropriate to remind ourselves what the Colombo Process is. The Colombo Process recognizes that each country, of which it is composed, is in the same product market, engaged in competition, trying to increase market share in the same product demand markets. This condition is accepted. The competition stances of each country will be honoured. But there are areas, which, the Colombo Process believes, would enhance their competitive positions. Some of them are as follows:

First, the Colombo Process is not a Trade Union of labour sending countries, intent on enforcing an increase in wages, improving work conditions, etc. These elements are present in the Colombo Process, but the Colombo Process works differently. It wishes to achieve its objectives, not through confrontation, but through dialogue.

Second, the Colombo Process is not an oligopoly, like OPEC, using supply dominance to enhance benefits. Occasionally, such assertion is seen in Colombo Process countries, where unacceptable human rights violations

had led to supply bans. But, this is rarely an issue that could not be speedily resolved.

Third, the Colombo Process is primarily a discussion mechanism, based on the view that it is in the minds of man that conflict is generated, and it is, therefore, in the minds of men that conflict resolution should begin. The Colombo Process is committed to the principle that the resolution of such differences should be through a measured analysis of issues. For this purpose, intellectual outputs are required. The factories which produce such intellectual outputs are the periodic meetings of Senior Officials. We, politicians, merely give values and offer direction. These are provided at Ministerial meetings of Colombo Process countries. Senior officials are there to convert these visions to realities. The Senior Official's meeting, which we are convening today, is meant exactly for that, to offer intellectual outputs. We want our officials to think as doers and, do as thinkers, and offer us suggestions about how our ideas are to be implemented.

Fourth, the Colombo Process is a lobby. There is another RCP, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. The Colombo Process is a grouping of labour sending countries of Asia. The Abu Dhabi dialogue is a grouping of labour receiving countries from Asia. One is in supply, the other is in demand. The Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi dialogue, swirl round each other, like a binary star system, kept together by the gravitational pull of its labour supply and demand.

While doing so, I am conscious that we are living in a world of rapid change. The old has to give way to the new. The Austrian economist, Schumpeter, went even further. He said that there is a need for a creative

destruction, the old habits of thought, structures, systems, products, should be deliberately destroyed and replaced.

I will give an example of what I am referring to. I do not consider women as equal to men. I consider women superior to men. Of these women, I consider the mother, the most superior. But, as much as bachelors, when they get married, have to give up their free behavior, when a woman becomes a mother, she no longer would enjoy all her rights. The right of the baby and infants take over. Babies and infants are true imperialists. All of us are their slaves, at their beck and call. Article 19 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child states that all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures could be taken to protect the child. Accordingly, I introduced the Family Background Report that prevented a mother, with children aged less than 5 years from exercising her right to go abroad for work. Many Civil Society Women Organisation objected, stating that this offends the constitutional rights of women, for free travel. One even said that fathers should take over mother's nurturing responsibilities. Another took me to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. But I remain undaunted. I draw this example to emphasise the difficulty in introducing change.

When I was appointed the Chair-in-Office of the Colombo Process in October 2013, I convened a grouping of experts, imprisoned them with me, in a hotel for two full days and nights. We explored what the Colombo Process should be and the direction it should take. We suggested five thrusts, the developmental, the humanitarian, the legal, the constitutional and informative thrust. I want to specially mention the humanitarian thrust, that of shifting from the commodity view of migrant workers to considering them as human beings. I benefitted from the Dhaka Declaration, developed by my predecessor Chair-in-Office, Hon. Khandkar Mosharraf Hossain of

Bangladesh. I was present at the Colombo Process meeting of 2012, where he enunciated it. I experienced a sense of euphoria, very much like the French Revolutionaries would have, when they proclaimed the Declaration of Human Rights in 1789. The Dhaka Declaration of 2012 was similar, it was the humanizing declaration of migrants rights, now incorporated in the five themes. Two of these themes concern remittances and the development of a standard contract. They are the subject matter of your deliberations at the SOM.

I was also concerned at the lack of financial support for the Colombo Process. The SOM will also discuss innovative ways of funding the Colombo Process, which will benefit my successors as Chair-in-Office.

As a politician, I would like specific and tangible outputs. One is, the standard contract and how to implement cheaper remittances. Both were specifically referred to in the concluding statement of the UN High Level Dialogue held in October 2013. I will be presenting your conclusions to the meeting of the GFMD scheduled to be held in Sweden, next week.

All Colombo Process countries had benefitted from the first phase of short term worker migration. We have to undertake product development of our migrant workers. The bulk of our migrant workers are at the lowest level, unskilled, mostly women. Product development for them is through re-skilling, by upgrading skills and get out of low paid, low value employment, which could be left to new competitors from outside the Asian region. By doing so, we will also be shifting from the view that short term migrant workers are mere commodities to the view that they are human beings who have skills to offer in a competitive product market. The Colombo Process should be in a re-branding exercise. Through productivity improvement we

will be able to outsmart our competitors from those outside the Colombo Process. The only weapon to meet competition is through productivity improvement, not through administration restrictions.

Keeping these considerations in view, I have got developed a strategic vision, with five themes.

We are in the cusp of change. We either adapt to change, or get overwhelmed by it and become outdated. The two year programme, presented to you, tries to do just that.

I welcome you to this SOM for an engaging two days of debate, discussions, sweat and perhaps even tears, but definitely, I hope, no assaults.

After a rewarding SOM meeting, I hope our overseas visitors would take a few days off from their grinding schedule, to visit Sri Lanka, enjoy her beauty, savour her cuisine, and generally have a good time.

Thank you.

