

Reclaiming Migrant's Voting Rights

The Migrant Services Centre, held a workshop on 17 Oct 2007 at the auditorium of Organisation of Professional Associations (OPA), Colombo on The Political Rights of Sri Lankan Expatriates.

Estimates from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) revealed a total of 1,221,763 Sri Lankan expatriates worked abroad in 2005. Workers classified into non-labour grades (including domestic workers), skilled and professional expatriates constitute 337,749 people. However it includes only numbers who went abroad mainly to the Gulf Region, through the SLBFE.

The UNHCR reports show that 130,000 Sri Lankans mostly in France, Canada, Cyprus, UK and Australia applied for asylum between 1996 and 2005. The Sri Lankan Diaspora in the UK is estimated at 200,000, of whom majority are professionals. Meanwhile, a large number of expatriates in Canada, Australia and the European countries, have escaped given estimates.

According to the Director of Migrant Services Centre, David Soysa, no expatriate was able to exercise the right to vote while being abroad during previously held national level elections in Sri Lanka.

"In an all inclusive democracy, denial of voting facilities is a denial of the fundamental right of any citizen" said David.

Expatriate Sri Lankans for whom data is available constitute 12% of the registered voters of Sri Lanka and 10% of the national work force. During the year 2005, they contributed to 17% of national savings and more than 20% of foreign exchange earnings.

The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990) ratified by Sri Lanka in 1996, obliges the State to change election laws to enable a system of special voting for migrant workers.

MSC pointed this out to the relevant authorities including The Human Rights Commission which made an inquiry upon hearing MSC's case. The Human Rights Commission then recommended to the Labour Minister to make "suitable arrangements to facilitate and ensure the voting rights of Sri Lankan migrant workers in the respective countries they are employed and proposed a special voting system".

However, there is a lack of progress on this recommendation. MSC is currently collecting signatures from migrant worker's families. The signatures will be

handed to the Sri Lankan President on International Migrants Day, on 18th December 2007.

“Yet time is fast catching up on us. Migrants want their rights, including Political Rights.

We have called upon all migrant workers, prospective migrant workers and members of migrant worker’s families to band themselves together irrespective of political allegiance and call for absentee voting at the next national elections in Sri Lanka. We believe political representation of migrant workers at a high political level is the best guarantee to restore the rights and dignity of migrant workers” David added.

There is a popular misconception that the term ‘migrant worker’ refers only to labour or unskilled grades. David disagreed.

“This is not so. The UN Convention defines a migrant worker ‘as a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national’. The Convention states that a migrant, irrespective of ‘nationality, age, economic position, property, marital status, birth or other status, is considered equally entitled to enjoy all rights conferred by the Convention”.

The Commissioner of Elections, Dayananda Dissanayake and the Consul General of the Philippines in Sri Lanka, William John Terrance Perera graced the workshop on Political Rights of Sri Lankan Expatriates.

The keynote address was delivered by Henry Rojas, a widely recognised Legal Counsel of the Centre for Migrant Advocacy in the Philippines. The panelists were Dr Kumari Jayawardena, Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, J.C. Weliamuna, Dr A.C. Visvalingam, and Kingsley Rodrigo. Chief Executive of the Marga Institute, Godfrey Gunatileke was the Chairman of the panel.

President Elect of the OPA, Elmo Perera, delivered the welcome address to an audience of academics, representatives from the business fraternity, trade unions, international & local non-governmental organisations, civil society members, diplomats, professionals from the private sector and officials from the public sector.