Forum: Special Conference 2

Issue: Reducing conflicts between immigrant and local populations in South East Asia

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Introduction

South East Asia is a sub region of Asia, consisting of the countries that are geographically south of China, east of India, and west of New Guinea. The region lies near the intersection of geological plates, with heavy seismic and volcanic activity. Southeast Asia consists of two geographic regions:

Maritime Southeast Asia: Philippines, East Malaysia, East Timor, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore

Mainland Southeast Asia (also known as Indochina): Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, West Malaysia, Vietnam

South East Asia's economic rise has been momentous. Since the early 1960s, Asia has grown richer faster than any other region in the world. In 1990, 56 percent of people in East Asia and 54 percent in South Asia lived on less than 1.25 USD a day. By 2010, these rates had fallen to 12 percent and 31 percent, respectively. Last year, East Asia grew by 7.1 percent and South Asia by 5.2 percent, faster than any other region in the world. Even though these countries have become much richer, the number of subnational conflicts has grown in the region, an occurrence that defies the common political belief that prosperity reduces the likelihood of violent conflicts. Migrant and immigrant populations across Southeast Asia are large, growing, and mobile. Over half the world's population lives in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2005, Asia hosted 53 million out of the world's 191 million migrants according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. But local populations are not always welcoming to newcomers, and beyond social tensions, there are often political or economic barriers as well.

Definition of Key Terms

Population

Summation of all the organisms of the same group or species, which live in the same geographical area, and have the capability of interbreeding.

Immigration
Movement of people into another country or region to which they are not native in order to settle there, especially as permanent residents or future citizens. Immigrants are motivated to leave their countries for a variety of reasons, including a desire for economic prosperity, political issues, family re-unification, escaping conflict or natural disaster, or simply the wish to change one's surroundings.

**Background**

In the 1970s and 1980s, international migration from Asia grew dramatically. The main destinations were North America, Australia, and the oil economies of the Middle East. Since the 1990s, migration within Asia has grown, particularly from less-developed countries with massive labor surpluses to fast-growing newly industrializing countries. Migration agents and labor brokers organize most recruitment of Asian migrant workers both to the gulf and within Asia. Their dominance is partly due to the unwillingness of receiving states to make bilateral temporary-worker agreements with countries of origin. Although countries like the Philippines regulate such agencies, some recruiters have engaged in the smuggling and trafficking of workers. Asian governments seek to strictly control migration, and migrants' rights are often very limited. Policymakers encourage temporary labor migration but generally prohibit family reunion and permanent settlement. While most migration in the region is temporary, trends toward long-term stay are becoming evident in some places.

Asia includes the Middle East, but we focus here on South Asia (the Indian subcontinent), East Asia, and Southeast Asia, with some discussion of Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific islands.

**Labor Migration Within Asia**

Since the mid-1980s, rapid economic growth and declining fertility have led to strong demand for labor in the new industrial economies of East and Southeast Asia. Labor migration within Asia grew exponentially in the first half of the 1990s. Some migrants returned home during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1999, but labor migration resumed quickly. Early flows were mainly low-skilled workers. In recent years, flows of the highly skilled have increased throughout the region, and demand for health-care workers is increasing (see section on highly qualified migrants).

Yet Asian migrants do not dominate the workforces of other Asian countries they way do in gulf countries. According to estimates from ILO, in 2004-2005, migrants made up less than 2 percent of the workforce in Japan, 12 percent in Malaysia, and 28 percent in Singapore. While existing flows from countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines have continued, new source countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma has become more significant.

**Analysis and Implication**

Southeast Asia’s remarkable economic performance over the last three decades has masked long-standing internal conflicts in several countries in the region, one of them being the conflicts between immigrant and local populations in South East Asia. Refugee problem is not a new one, but the erection of legal barriers against their
movement across borders is a contemporary phenomenon. One in every forty citizens in the world is a refugee or an internally displaced person (IDP) or an economic migrant. South Asia has witnessed the movement of 35-40 million refugees since partition. There is considerable focus on refugees, but adequate attention has not been paid to IDPs.

The phenomenon creates legal, political, security, sociological and psychological problems. There are different types of displacement problems in South Asia. The Rohingyas, Sri Lankan Tamils and Afghans constitute a typology of forced migration, while Bangladeshis and Nepalis in India are generally seeking a better quality of life. Internal Displacement, especially of people moving from villages to cities in search of employment or due to natural disaster, constitutes a third problem. There is a need for greater gender sensitivity in analyzing the refugee problem. Women are more vulnerable, apart from the aged and children among those displaced, the problem is also related to the crisis of governance in South Asia.

No country in South Asia has signed either the 1951 Treaty on Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. Despite that, most of the states have accepted refugees, both from countries inside the region and outside. For example, there are Rohingyas from Myanmar in Bangladesh, Tamils from Sri Lanka in India, Lhotsampas from Bhutan in Nepal and Afghans from Afghanistan in Pakistan. With this held, the refugee management process in South Asia is not uniform and there have been shifts in terms of policy framework. Two factors—humanitarian and national security—largely shape State’s attitudes in either accepting or refusing the refugees. Refugees become a threat to the host country in three ways- as a threat or security risk to the host regime; as a threat to its cultural identity; and as a socio-economic burden. The countries of origin are also at risk. There are instances in South Asia when the host country armed refugees against the countries of origin.

Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)

Immigration Policies

SEARAC plays a proactive role in promoting immigration reforms that are in the best interest of our communities. As an endorsing organization of the Reform Immigration for America campaign, SEARAC proudly stands in a united national effort to work toward comprehensive immigration reform that includes:

1. Legalizing the status of undocumented immigrants working and living in the United States;
2. Reuniting families, protecting workers’ rights, and ensuring a secure future flow of immigrants;
3. Implementing smart, effective enforcement measures;
4. Prioritizing immigrant integration; and
5. Respecting the due process rights of all persons in the U.S.

Immigration reform will affect Southeast Asian American communities in many ways. From the ability to re-unify with family members, to legalization, workers rights and the security of our nation, Southeast Asian Americans
have a huge stake in immigration reform. SEARAC believes that family unification and the strengthening of the family based migration system should remain a priority in immigration policies. Additionally, immigration reform must ensure that the millions who are undocumented in the U.S. are able to fully contribute to our society through a strong legalization program.

**Integration**

Integration provisions in immigration policies are of great significance to newer American communities, including Southeast Asian Americans. The integration of immigrants and refugees in the U.S. is essential to their success and full participation in society; however, numerous barriers prolong and complicate this process. The struggling economy creates additional barriers for new immigrant and refugees seeking adequate resources for job training and employment.

SEARAC’s work on integration strives to ensure that all integration programs and services, including naturalization testing, fees and waivers, are accessible to those who are low income, English language learners, the elderly and other vulnerable individuals. Additionally, we work toward ensuring that integration programs such as job training, English and naturalization courses are adequately funded and expanded to meet the needs of newcomers. We believe that a significant portion of these resources must be available and accessible for local immigrant and refugee community based organizations serving communities in need.

**Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia**

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia is a peace treaty among Southeast Asian countries established by the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) a geopolitical and economic organization of 10 countries located in Southeast Asia.

On February 24, 1976, the treaty was signed into force by the leaders of the original members of ASEAN. It was amended on December 15, 1987 by a protocol to open the document for accession by states outside Southeast Asia, and again on July 25, 1998, to condition such accession on the consent of all member states. On July 23, 2001, the parties established the rules of procedure of the treaty's High Council, which was stipulated in Article 14 of the document. On October 7, 2003, during the annual summit, a declaration was released.

**Major Parties Involved**

**AFTA- ASEAN Free Trade Area**

Agreement by ASEAN to reduce trade barriers, such as quotas and tariffs, among member states

Founded in Singapore in 1992

Dedicated to goal of having nearly free trade among member nations in 15 years

**APEC- Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation**
Founded in 1989, largely through Australian encouragement

Members- Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States promotes regional integration and free trade (including global free trade)

Possible Solutions

Breaking the vicious cycle of violence, poverty, and injustice is incredibly complex. The emphasis must lie in building institutions that enjoy the confidence of citizens and provide security, economic opportunities, and access to justice. This can be challenging under any circumstances, but is especially hard to achieve in regions affected by conflict.

The countries should explore means to use decentralization as a core component of any peace settlement. Many Asian countries, which have seen the economic and security benefits of centralization, are wary of devolving powers to areas. But, as the case of Indonesia shows - where most subnational conflicts have ended - allowing for more local control of resources and decisions, within the framework of a sovereign state, can actually be quite an effective conflict prevention and management tool. Countries should look for new ideas and create the organizations, spaces and networks to develop them. Many of the standard approaches to dealing with conflict were developed based on experiences dealing with national-level civil wars in the fragile states of Sub-Saharan Africa. These are very different contexts to most of Asia's subnational conflict areas. There is a need to develop new approaches and tools for dealing with conflicts in middle income and growing states, and to document cases of success and failure. There is a real opportunity for Asia's economic rise to be accompanied by leadership in finding new ways to deal with the region's subnational conflicts.

One way economic opportunities can be increased is by improving infrastructure, especially for transport and energy industries, but better transport allows people to move to jobs (rather than the other way around) and the greater availability of energy often removes a binding constraint to local development. Virtually all the post-conflict regions in Southeast Asia tend to be disconnected from the rest of the economy and suffer from energy shortages. Restoring connectivity through better infrastructure reconnects these local economies with the mainstream.

Bibliography


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