

Speech of H.E. Saqr Ghobash
Opening Session of the 2nd Global Forum on Migration and Development
Plenary Hall, PICC, Pasay City, October 29, 2008

I am honoured to have been asked to address this opening session of the Global Forum on Migration and Development and take this opportunity to relay to you all the warm greetings of the Government of the United Arab Emirates.

The 2008 Manila Global Forum on Migration and Development revolves around the central theme "Protecting and Empowering Migrants for Development".

The United Arab Emirates is particularly pleased to contribute by co-chairing, - along with our host and inspirational partner, the Government of the Philippines - the flagship first Roundtable - "Migration, Development and Human Rights - Protecting the Rights of Migrants - A Shared Responsibility."

This Forum will focus primarily on contractual workers and on the roles and efforts of governments to protect their rights and improve the quality of their lives. It will, in particular, consider how protection of their rights can help enhance their contribution to the development of both their countries of origin and the host countries. It is with this specific assignment in mind that my Government comes to this Forum, in a spirit of shared responsibility and partnership.

Almost 3 million Asian contract workers leave their countries every year to seek employment around the world. A large majority opts for employment in the Gulf States. In 2007, there were several million of these workers in the UAE, working in sectors as diverse as hospitality, health care, technology, the oil and gas industry, financial services and construction.

As the numbers of these workers grow and the sectors in which they work become more diversified, their impact is increasingly felt at national, regional and global levels. In brief, contractual workers contribute significantly to the development of both their countries of origin and those where they work, improving, at the same time, their own economic situation and that of their families.

For those benefits to be fully realised, however, labour mobility needs to be effectively managed through the formulation of appropriate legal and policy frameworks, through the development of administrative structures and through on-going capacity building.

In the past, progress towards these objectives has been seriously hampered by the fact that countries of origin and destination often had separate agendas as well as different - and not infrequently, conflicting - priorities for action.

It is precisely for this reason that the UAE has attached such importance in recent years to improving dialogue with individual countries of origin and seeking the establishment of broader consultations at the multilateral level.

In September 2005, the UAE, together with other Gulf States, attended on an informal basis the third Ministerial Consultations on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia, more commonly known as the Colombo Process. There, participants discussed the evolution of patterns of labour mobility in the region over the last decade as well as a wide range of policy issues and recommendations including: increasing cooperation between countries of origin and destination; optimising the benefits of organised labour flows, including the development of new markets, increasing remittance flows through formal channels and enhancing their impact on development; ensuring the welfare and well-being of vulnerable overseas workers, especially women; and building institutional capacity and inter-ministerial coordination to meet the challenges posed by labour mobility.

In the light of these recommendations, the UAE took the initiative of hosting earlier this year a two-day

Ministerial consultation in Abu Dhabi that brought together twenty countries of origin and destination in Asia alongside leading international and regional organisations.

The discussions noted that temporary contractual labour was a well-established concept in Asia, but acknowledged that processes of globalisation, involving the free movement of capital, the greater integration of economies and technological advances, provided a context in which there is increasing competition to boost economic growth and productivity through labour mobility at all skill levels.

In this connection, the Ministers considered that the best social and economic outcomes would be achieved through the promotion and implementation of transparent policies, through the institution of fair and efficient recruitment and employment practices and through the provision of good living and working conditions.

The participating Ministers agreed to a declaration of principles now known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration. The Declaration stresses that countries of origin, countries of destination and, most importantly, the workers themselves benefit when workers' rights are effectively recognised and respected. The Abu Dhabi Declaration underlines, in particular, that countries of origin benefit when workers are able to use their remittances to enhance their families' living conditions and to improve the educational status of their children, and to return home with skills and capital that contribute to the development of their own countries.

The Declaration goes on to propose the creation of four key partnerships between countries of origin and destination with a view to

- o Enhancing the knowledge base on essential policy and programme components, such as labour market trends, skills profiles and remittance flows;
- o Building capacity for the effective matching of labour demand and supply;
- o Preventing illegal recruitment practices and promoting welfare and protection measures for contractual workers; and
- o Developing a framework for a comprehensive approach to managing temporary contractual mobility, covering the four phases of labour mobility, namely recruitment and pre-departure preparation in the country of origin; installation and employment in the country of destination; preparation for return; and return and reintegration in the community of origin.

Given the consonance between these partnership objectives and the well-articulated goals of the Philippines Chairmanship of this second Global Forum on Migration and Development, the UAE took the decision to join the GFMD Steering Committee and actively participate in the discussions that helped frame the agenda and work programme for this Conference in Manila.

In parallel with this, the UAE Government took the initiative, in consultation with other GCC member states, to propose to the Governments of India and the Philippines the setting up of a pilot project to survey and document best practices in the management of the temporary contractual employment cycle.

The three governments have now agreed to collaborate towards the development of such a pilot project with expert input from the Arab Labour Organisation, the International Labour Organisation and the International Organisation on Migration.

The overall goal of the project is, to put it simply, to test a range of practical measures that will serve to improve the quality of life and work of contractual workers. In more specific terms, the project seeks first of all to improve the quality of recruitment, induction and other pre-deployment processes, and then to provide the workers with decent working and living conditions during their temporary contractual employment and residency in the host country.

Two important innovations complete the picture: The preparation of temporary contractual workers for return to their country of origin; and the facilitation of their ultimate return to and reintegration into their home communities. All of this is to be undertaken in a spirit of shared responsibility and partnership.

The project will leverage the introduction in the UAE of new policy guidelines and enforceable measures that ensure the protection of wages, the provision of adequate work and living conditions, access to avenues of legal redress, and the upholding of fundamental human rights.

We are confident that valuable lessons will be learnt from this experience. Ultimately, we hope that we might be able to draw from it the substance of a draft comprehensive regional framework for cooperation among Asian countries of origin and destination that will demonstrate lessons learned and best practices in the effective administration of the full temporary contractual employment cycle. The formulation of this future framework for regional cooperation was a key recommendation of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue.

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests and delegates, In recent weeks, we have been reminded as never before that all countries of the world are closely inter-connected and that only concerted action can offer solutions to complex issues. This Forum is an opportunity for us to explore ways and means of creating a more beneficial and humane experience for those who work abroad, while ensuring that it is also a constructive process for countries of origin and destination alike. My Government is committed to this goal and welcomes the opportunity to work with all those who hold a stake in its fulfillment.

I wish you a successful and productive meeting. May God bless you all.