

## Migration Network Connecting South-Southeast Asia: *An Evolving Non-traditional Security Threat in Indo-Pacific Region*

Debasis Dash

University of Malaya

Migration is a global phenomenon with over hundreds of millions of people moving across the physical borders, making the cartographic lines demarcating political borders look less relevant and blurred.<sup>1</sup> This trans-border and transnational movement of people have several reasons to it. The phenomenon refers to both voluntary and involuntary movement of people affected by and because of political, social, economic, security and personal reasons. However, irrespective of the type of migration as it happens, there are legitimate security concerns and challenges posed both to the sending and receiving nation-state. While the concerns over the violation of human rights and human dignity remains the core issue, the migration network also provides a fertile ground for both the non-state and state actors to push their devious agenda through the network. Moreover, the flow of migrants irrespective of the ground realities, also creates a favorable condition for human trafficking, slavery, smuggling and development of transnational organized crime networks and growth of militant organizations via movement of men, money, material and ideas.<sup>2</sup> The article intends to highlight

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<sup>1</sup> “ILO Global Estimates on Migrant Workers,” International Labour Organization (ILO), December 15, 2015, [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS\\_436343/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_436343/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Afrose Jahan Chaity, “How Rohingyas Are Becoming Victims of Human Trafficking,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 3, 2018, accessed Dec 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/05/03/human-traffickers-targeting-rohingya-refugees-bangladeshi-camps>.

the security challenges posed by the transnational migration networks that resides below the traditional threat spectrum and to trigger rethinking of national security strategies involving multi-agency coordination both within and across the national boundaries in the Indo-Pacific region.

## Migration Network as an Economy

The transnational and trans-border (in)voluntary movement of people in search of better life and job opportunities via legal and illegal means have developed an economy of its kind in the region. Along its course, the thin line between forced migration and human trafficking blurs resulting in smuggling and slavery at the end point.<sup>3</sup> Also, there are incidents in the recent past where a legitimate supply of labor force to a foreign country turns into an exploitative regime through nexus developed by recruiting agents and the government officials,<sup>4</sup> thereby creating a vicious cycle of exploitation of blue-collar workers. Those migrant workers are destined to work at the bottom end of the job spectrum that involves dangerous, dirty and difficult works,<sup>5</sup> which locales of the host country are reluctant to take up. Interestingly, most of the time both the trafficker and the victim share same ethnic and linguistic background. Even though the working environment, living conditions and the labor wage in offshore markets remains worse, the flow of migrants remains unhindered. There are push and pull factors contributing to this flow.<sup>6</sup> The push factors triggering outward flow of migrants are the conditions of political instability, lack of employment opportunities, poverty and insecurity prevailing in the country of their origin. On other hand, the presence of diasporic migrants and their businesses in the foreign

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<sup>3</sup> Farhan Navid Yousaf, "Forced Migration, Human Trafficking, and Human Security," *Current Sociology*, Vol. 66, Issue 2, (2018): 209–225.

<sup>4</sup> "Anti-graft Sleuths Arrest 6 Immigration Officers at KLIA for Letting Hardcore Criminals into Malaysia for Cash," *The Strait Times*, September 28, 2018, accessed Dec 7 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/anti-graft-sleuths-arrest-6-immigration-officers-at-klia-for-letting-hardcore-criminals>.

<sup>5</sup> Kamles Kumar, "Malaysians Shun '3D' Jobs Because of Social Stigma, Not Low Wages, Employers Say," *Malay Mail*, February 17, 2016, accessed Dec 10, 2018, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1062173/malaysians-shun-3d-jobs-because-of-social-stigma-not-low-wages-employers-sa>.

<sup>6</sup> "Migrant Smuggling in Asia: Current Trends and Related Challenges," UNODC, Volume II (July 2018), [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant-Smuggling/2018-2019/SOM\\_in\\_Asia\\_and\\_the\\_Pacific\\_II\\_July\\_2018.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant-Smuggling/2018-2019/SOM_in_Asia_and_the_Pacific_II_July_2018.pdf).

land along with the strength of currency and employment opportunities in the respective destination countries considered as pull factors. The diasporic migrant networks also provide necessary support in terms of facilitating accommodation, work permits and employment for their incoming fellows. The migration networks also provide a ready ground for trafficking of both genuine and counterfeit goods including counterfeit currencies and drugs, bypassing customs.<sup>7</sup> Hence an underground economy develops running into hundreds of billions of dollars (U.S.) that thrives on the network. In the context of South and South East Asia, this network covers land, air and sea routes. The migrant smuggling route of Bangladesh-Singapore-Indonesia-Malaysia, through which Bangladeshi migrants are brought into Malaysia via fishing boats, illegally.<sup>8</sup> In this case, the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh including Rohingya refugees are flown to Singapore from Dhaka and then ferried into Indonesia via boats and then to Malaysia dodging maritime law enforcement agencies along the route. There are such illegal migration corridors that exist over land, air and sea connecting South-Southwest-South East Asian countries. Some countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and Indonesia serve as transit points for smugglers, depending upon the transit country's strategic location with respect to the host country.

### **Migration Networks as an Emerging Non-Traditional Security Challenge**

While the transnational movement of people and ideas are key to globalization and growth of national economies including creation of shared global economic future, the security aspects of migration should not be ignored. Unlike conventional military threats that are direct and can be gauged from the position of military's fighting capability with respect to country's threat profile, non-traditional security threats are indirect and remain embedded within country's everyday life. Those threats strike the economic, political and societal fault lines with innovative use of technology, to create internal security crisis that may result in severe political

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<sup>7</sup> "The Illicit Trafficking of Counterfeit Goods and Transnational Organized Crime," UNODC, Issue 57, February 4, 2014, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/counterfeit/FocusSheet/Counterfeit\\_focussheet\\_EN\\_HIRES.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/counterfeit/FocusSheet/Counterfeit_focussheet_EN_HIRES.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Porimol Palma, "Bangladeshis Resort to Taking Risky Illegal Route to Malaysia," *The Strait Times*, May 15, 2015, accessed December 6, 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/bangladeshis-resort-to-taking-risky-illegal-route-to-malaysia>.

and economic instability. Hence, with globalization the issue of migration has caught the attention of security and intelligence community. It must be remembered that the issue of migration is not restricted to transport of human only, it also provides for the use of human as a conduit for illegal transfer of money (hawala networks), propagation of ideas and transport of materials under the radar of law enforcement agencies. In short, the migration networks also provide a ready ground for drug trafficking,<sup>9</sup> terror financing, insertion of counterfeit currencies into domestic economy, religious radicalization and terrorist activities by non-state actors with an active support from a nation-state. In addition to that, the innovative use of internet and social media apps for communication purpose made migration networks more effective. From terrorist organizations operating in South and South East Asia to the transnational organized crime networks involved in smuggling of men and money across the region, the quintessential use of communication apps like WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber is well documented. The arrest of Bangladeshi radicals in Singapore and emergence of terrorism along Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines routes proved how fast and effective spread of ideas can be.<sup>10</sup> However, the question arises, how does the illegal immigrants are able to escape the state's surveillance radar? The answer is corruption and diasporic migrant support. While the local corrupt officials<sup>11</sup> overlook their presence in return of monetary benefits, the diasporic migrant networks provide necessary logistical support for arranging work permits, employment and business

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<sup>9</sup> Aquib Khan, "Destitute Rohingya Refugees Turn to Drug Trade; Fuel Influx of Illegal Substances into Bangladesh," *Firstpost*, April 24, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/destitute-rohingya-refugees-turn-to-drug-trade-fuel-influx-of-illegal-substances-into-bangladesh-4437765.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Jones, "Opinion: How ISIS Has Changed Terrorism in Indonesia," *The New York Times Company*, May 22, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/isis-terrorism-indonesia-women.html>; "Bangladeshi Radicals Met Regularly in Angullia Mosque in Little India," *Today Online*, January 20, 2016, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/bangladeshi-radicals-met-regularly-angullia-mosque-little-india-reports-say>; Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Shifting Sands of Terrorism in South-east Asia," *The Strait Times*, February 10, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/shifting-sands-of-terrorism-in-south-east-asia>.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Laxon, "Immigration Officials Target Corruption in Indian Student Market," *NZME*, August 9, 2017, accessed December 7, 2018, [https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11901067](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11901067); Mazwin Nik Anis, "600 KLIA Staff Transferred, Some Suspected of Trafficking," *The Star Online*, December 16, 2017, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/12/16/600-klia-staff-transferred-some-suspected-of-trafficking/>.

opportunities for their illegally arrived brethren in the foreign country.<sup>12</sup> At time, they themselves become the conduit of sending remittances of their undocumented or overstayed migrant brother back home. In such scenarios, the management of over internal security crisis with a transnational characteristic has made cooperation within the national boundary and with other nation states both a reality and a challenge. Hence, it is imperative for national security planners to include national traditional threats in the hindsight while developing an overall national security strategy. So that, necessary legal and diplomatic arrangements can be done regarding creation of necessary institutions with capabilities to address the kind of threat profile.

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<sup>12</sup> Ajay Kanth, "Illegal Bangla Migrants Securing Aadhaar Cards," *The New Indian Express*, April 15, 2018, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2018/apr/15/illegal-bangla-migrants-securing-aadhaar-cards-1801650.html>.

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**Institute of International Relations @ National Chengchi University**  
No.64, Wanshou Rd., Wenshan District  
Taipei City, 116, Republic of China (Taiwan)  
<http://iir.nccu.edu.tw>

**Center for Southeast Asian Studies @ National Chengchi University**  
No.64, Wanshou Rd., Wenshan District  
Taipei City, 116, Republic of China (Taiwan)  
<http://cseas.nccu.edu.tw>

**Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies @ FLAME University**  
Gat No. 1270, Lavale, Off. Pune Bangalore Highway,  
Vadzai, Dist. Pune - 412115, India  
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