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Human Rights are Essential to Migrant Discussion

Ensuring that every migrant around the world is afforded basic human rights regardless of status is the overarching message civil society organizations and trade unions want the United Nations to take away during hearings set to be held today. The dozens of groups from around the world participating in the hearings met for a day-long, pre-hearing conference on Tuesday where basic principles of migration were discussed.

The response of the groups was spurred in part by a report of the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the issue of international migration and development. The report focused primarily on migration as part of an economic model based on the liberalization of markets, dismissing in great part the fact that migrants also are human beings. Furthermore, the report suggested that in order to enjoy economic development, a country must encourage and engage in migration.

While the groups welcome the attention by the United Nations to the issue of migration and appreciate the opportunity to participate in the hearings today as well as the High-level Dialogue to be held in September, the potential "commodification of migrants" is alarming. Recognizing the positive economic impact that migrants' remittances make in their home countries and the value-added they offer to the workforce in their host countries, these economic advantages cannot be the primary framework for the migration discussion.

"Examining migration and its relationship to development have to begin from the framework of rights, otherwise we risk treating migrants as the means and not as the end in itself," said Genevieve Gencianos, Public Services International programme coordinator and speaker at today's hearings. Migrants generally want to remain in their home countries, Gencianos said.

However, poor government policies have failed to provide enabling environments and generate successful economic development including decent jobs that pay living wages and which enforce labor rights. As a result, most migrants, mainly women and young people, leave their homes because they feel they have no other choice. Half of all migrants are women who are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Other extremely vulnerable groups include indigenous people and ethnic minorities.

Several studies have shown that migrants would stay in their home countries if they could earn a living wage and work in a safe environment. Furthermore, a majority of migrants would return to their home country if those same issues were addressed and if policies were in place for their reintegration. Integration in host countries, often difficult because of racism and discrimination, is an issue that needs to be immediately addressed by governments in receiving countries, according to the groups.

As a foundation to ensuring basic human rights both in sending and receiving countries, the civil society organizations and trade unions strongly encourage all member states to ratify and fully implement the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the ILO Conventions on Migrant Workers, C97 and C143.

One aspect of the Secretary General's report, which was welcomed by the groups was a proposal for a permanent consultative forum on migration. "We very much welcome the opportunity for a continuing discussion on this very important issue at the highest possible levels," said Sajida Ally of Migrant Rights International, adding that she strongly encourages the UN to reach out to and permanently involve civil society groups and trade unions in this forum. "The bottom line is we know more about the subject than governments do," Ally said. "Unless civil society and unions are admitted to each and every stage supporting migration, our prediction is that we will continue with a dysfunctional system which does little more than entrench the exploitation of vulnerable people."

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