



## **Worker exodus hurting Sri Lanka**

**By Dilshani Samaraweera**

Experts say Sri Lanka should streamline migration of skilled personnel from sectors experiencing labour shortages. Sri Lanka's domestic workforce is reducing because of the worker exodus to foreign countries. In some skilled categories, such as the health and construction services, the shortage is already being felt. Such labour shortages, say experts, can reduce economic growth, despite the many benefits of inward remittances.

So, until domestic demand can be met, the government is advised to "streamline" migration of personnel from sectors experiencing labour shortages. "To safeguard interests of the country, while reaping benefits of labour migration, it is necessary to ensure that education policies and training programmes in the country match the needs of the local market as well as the envisaged global markets.

Until the workers to meet these skill demands are trained, the promotion of workers, in sectors with labour shortages, need to be streamlined," says a paper by Ms Nisha Arunatileke, Ms Priyanka Jayawardena and Dr Dushni Weerakoon, from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Sri Lanka. The paper was presented at an International Conference on Migration organised by the IPS and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Colombo, last week.

### **All abroad**

Large scale migration is already causing skill shortages in the health and construction sectors in Sri Lanka. In the health sector for instance, compared to other countries in the region, Sri Lanka has the highest expatriation rate of doctors and the third highest expatriation rate of nurses to OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. This amounted to 4,668 Sri Lankan doctors and 2,032 nurses working in OECD countries, according to a report in 2007.

"These statistics indicate that the brain drain of health sector workers to OECD countries is particularly high for Sri Lanka. This is of further concern given the short supply of several categories of specialist doctors in the country," says the paper. Sri Lanka's workforce itself is shrinking because increasing numbers of men and women are leaving the country every year for better paying foreign jobs. "In the recent past, the importance of foreign employment as a source of employment continued to increase and has contributed to reducing domestic labour force growth," says the paper. From 2006 -2007, Sri Lanka's labour force shrank by 110,000. By now, over 1.6 million people are working in foreign countries, which is around 22% of the domestic workforce. Given the already large outflow, continuing to promote across-the-board migration, say experts, can slow down Sri Lanka's economic growth.

### **Over reliance**

Although foreign jobs reduce the pressure for creating jobs inside the country and bring in foreign exchange, analysts say relying heavily on foreign jobs makes the country more vulnerable to external shocks. For instance, by now, remittances have become the second largest foreign export generator for the country. But the current global recession is threatening this large source of foreign exchange and the jobs of over 1.6 million Sri Lankans working abroad.

The paper also notes that reliance on foreign employment delays domestic reforms that are needed to improve job creation inside the country.