

Illegal in Israel BY Eric Beauchemin, Radio Netherlands, Sept. 15 2004

In the 1990s, 300,000 foreigners went to Israel in search of work. They were replacing Palestinian labourers who had been barred from entering Israel after the outbreak of the intifada or Palestinian uprising. The foreigners pay up to 15,000 dollars (12,200 euros) for the right to enter and work in Israel. Today, two-thirds of these workers are illegal, and the government is expelling them, including Filipinos Juan, Josie and their three children.

In the past, Palestinian workers formed the backbone of two core industries in Israel: agriculture and construction. Over 100,000 Palestinians commuted every morning into Israel and returned every evening. When the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin closed the border in 1991, there was an acute need to replace them. The government decided to accept foreign workers from Asia, Africa and central Europe.

“It started with Thai workers in agriculture,” says Galia Sabar of the Hotline for Foreign Workers. “They were hired because of their knowledge, stamina and willingness to work long hours in very difficult climate conditions. And in the construction industry it started with Romanians and Turks and then moved to Chinese. From there, it expanded to home care for the elderly and sick. And then there was a spill-over into other fields of menial work.”

#### Permits

Israeli companies arrange permits for foreign workers through the Ministry of Labour. The companies then contact Israeli employment agencies who use middlemen to recruit workers abroad. Migrant labourers pay thousands of dollars for the “right” to work in Israel. Chinese labourers pay up to 15,000 dollars—they have to work at least two years in Israel just to pay off the fee.

The fees are illegal, says Ela Keren of the Open University in Tel Aviv. “The employers and manpower companies are benefiting from this system. Many people in the government are also cashing in, including a previous labour minister.” Five hundred Israeli manpower agencies are involved in the recruitment business. It’s estimated they earn 500 million dollars a year in commissions.

#### Modern-day slavery

Unlike in most other countries, foreign workers are bonded to their employers. If they leave—even if they are not being paid or are being mistreated—they become illegal and face imprisonment and deportation. Two-thirds of the 300,000 foreign migrants today in Israel are illegal.

Illegal workers are constantly being deported, but there’s a steady stream of new migrants arriving in the country, says Ela Keren, who’s writing a doctoral thesis on this ‘slave trade’. “We call it the revolving door policy. The idea is to have a very flexible and cheap labour force, without any rights, without even any knowledge of their rights. We have asked the government to provide workers, as they arrive in Israel, with information about their rights. The authorities have told employers to do this, but they have the least incentive to inform workers about their rights. It’s another example of why conditions of modern-day slavery have been created in Israel by the government’s own policy.”

#### Deportations

Conditions for foreign migrants deteriorated even further after the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000. Unemployment rates in Israel soared from 4 to 10 percent. In 2002, the authorities decided to deport all the illegal immigrants. “It was a very strong call from various parties, that deporting them would solve the unemployment problem,” Dr Sabar says. “They were looking

for quick solutions instead of making the connection between the economic situation and the political situation. Migrant workers were simply a scapegoat.”

The government’s goal is to deport 5,000 illegal workers a month. It has hired 400 additional policemen who have been picking up illegal migrants on the streets and even carrying out raids on homes in the middle of the night. According to Herzel Hagay, who used to be in charge of implementing the deportation policy, “the authorities are currently deporting about 2,000 people a month. It’s very stupid. We can solve the problem without all these deportations. It simply requires enforcing the law regarding manpower agencies and employers and increasing supervision at our borders.”

#### Judaism

The government declined to comment on its immigration policy. Even defenders of foreign migrants believe that the labourers cannot stay indefinitely in Israel. “We were established as a safe haven for Jewish people after the Holocaust,” says Dr Sabar. “The authorities are not going to open a debate about this for the sake of foreign migrants because it’s a non-issue. We are a Jewish state.” On the other hand, she acknowledges that the authorities must devise a legal status for the foreign workers. “We cannot have 300,000 to 500,000 people—that’s up to 8 percent of Israel’s population—who have no clear identity.”

Ela Keren of the Open University takes a much stronger stand. “What we are doing is illegal. We are violating these people’s rights. The government on the one hand claims that Israel is a refuge for Jews who themselves suffered human rights violations and persecutions. The historical irony—and a very, very sad one for me as an Israeli—is to see my country treating others just as badly and sometimes even worse.”