

Tough times force the foreign workers out

Indonesia is bracing for the return of hundreds of thousands of 'tenaga kerja Indonesia' as the economic crisis sets in. AMY CHEW, SITI NURBAIYAH NADZMI and SANTHA OORJITHAM explore the impact on both Indonesia and Malaysia, where foreigners make up about 20 per cent of the workforce

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IN many Western countries, there is the social welfare service to look after the old, the sick and the unemployed.

Here in Asia, there is also care for the old, the sick and the unemployed — a huge private enterprise known as "filial piety".

It is this deep sense of duty towards parents and family that compels millions from impoverished and developing countries to toil in a foreign land to earn money to pay for food, housing, healthcare and education for their loved ones back home.

Migrant workers remitted a staggering US\$283 billion (RM1 trillion) to developing countries last year, according to the World Bank.

"I sent half my salary back home," says Indonesian Norida Abdul Karim, who earned RM800 a month working 12 hours a day, five days a week at an electronics factory in the Klang Valley.

Her employer provided her with hostel accommodation and medical care at the factory's clinic.

Indonesian migrant workers, who make up the bulk of the estimated 2.1 million workers in Malaysia, send an estimated US\$4-US\$5 billion back home annually.

Remittances from migrant workers are crucial in helping to fight hunger and poverty as they feed millions and exceed Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) from foreign governments to poor countries.

In Indonesia, many villages have been transformed by the remittances — houses with mud floors are rebuilt into permanent structures and thousands of children complete their education funded by the toil of their migrant worker parents.

The prudent use their hard-earned money to set up small businesses which generate income for the rest of the family.

But as the global economic crisis bites, migrant workers are being retrenched in record numbers as factories shut down, construction projects



Indonesian workers planting grass near Hospital Sungai Buloh. Indonesia expects hundreds of thousands of such workers to be sent back during the economic crisis.

come to a halt and oil palm plantations reduce capacity.

Norida was among the first wave of 22 Indonesians retrenched at the electronic factory in Selangor where she worked.

"I think they wanted to terminate people because of the economic crisis," she says.

More than 400 Indonesian migrant workers have been retrenched from the company and the last of them were terminated this week. However, a few thousand Malaysians still work at the factory.

When she was axed, Norida and her fellow Indonesian workers received no retrenchment benefits.

Norida suspects that if her employer made any contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), the money was pocketed by the agency that placed her at the factory.

Her employer just informed the agency of her dismissal. Norida has had no work since then, although her agency promised to find her a new job.

Indonesian labour organisations predict a flood of migrant workers will be repatriated as the economic crisis bites.

"This year, we expect hundreds of thousands of Indonesian workers to be sent back. The bulk of them will return from Hong Kong, Singapore,



Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar says Malaysia is working to ensure a smooth and speedy repatriation of foreign workers

South Korea and Taiwan where many factories are closing down," says Yulienzah, vice-chairman of Scala Brini Migrant Solidarity.

Yulienzah herself was a former migrant worker in Hong Kong and speaks fluent Cantonese. "From Malaysia, we expect thousands of illegals to be deported."

Malaysia is currently working with foreign embassies to ensure a smooth and speedy process to repatriate foreign workers.

"This includes those who have overstayed and those without valid documentation — in other words, those who have been staying and working illegally in this country," says Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has called upon developed countries to recognise the contributions made by migrant workers towards their economic growth and recovery and to resist the temptation to close the doors on them in times of an economic slowdown.

"Although the economic crisis is still unfolding and its full impact remains unclear, it would be counter-productive for governments in developed countries to close their doors to migrants," said IOM director-general William Lacy Swing on International Migrants' Day last month.

"It becomes ever more crucial to ensure that ODA levels do not drop at this time, to ensure that poverty and development gaps aren't exacerbated by this economic crisis.

"If they are, then the pressure on people to migrate by whatever means they can find will increase."

To date, the government has