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Trends and patterns of asylum seekers migrating to Sri Lanka (Case study of Mirihana Detention camp)

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Introduction

Asylum seeker influx has become a salient issue in Sri Lanka. Asylum seekers are people who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to well-founded fears of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, ethnic minority and political opinions. UNHCR reveals that there is a sharp increase of 0.3 million asylum seekers worldwide in comparison to last year. Asylum seekers migrate through air, sea ports and by crossing land borders and often breach immigration laws and regulations in the process. Asylum seekers demonstrate a trend in moving to Sri Lanka to stay in transit largely due to the peaceful nature of Sri Lankan society, lack of extremism/racism and the co-existence of diverse communities with different beliefs. Since Sri Lanka has not ratified the 1951 UNHCR convention, the government neither accepts refugees in to the country nor provides any demand or facilitates their long-term stay in the country. Nevertheless, the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers are protected by international law. Although the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Sri Lanka were small in the past, within the last few years the counts have increased. Introducing solutions for asylum influx is a challenging task when they arrive in groups and a burden to the economy of the country due to the difficulties caused for the government by over population and financial strength.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate migration patterns of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka. The specific objectives are to study the demographic and socio-economic backgrounds of asylum seekers, their expectations for the future in the form of either resettlement in a contracting state or voluntary repatriation, the reasons behind their migration, and the socio-cultural and economic effects on local society due to the integration of asylum seekers.

Data and methods

The area selected for study is the Mirihana detention camp located in Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. This Camp is located inside the Mirihana police premises and was established under the Immigrants and Emigrants Act 20 of 1948. There are also detainees other than asylum seekers in the camp. The sample selected was the total number of asylum seekers detained. Both male and female asylum seekers are included in the sample. Therefore, the sampling method was purposive. The total number of the sample was 38

individuals. Data was collected through archival research referring the registries, log entries and records maintained by Immigration officials attached to the detention center. Further, secondary sources such as academic publications and newspapers were used. Interviews were carried out incorporated with semi structured questionnaires from asylum seekers. Quantitative data were analysed through Minitab and qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

It was revealed that the highest number of asylum seekers who migrated to Sri Lanka originated from Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition, the camp also includes asylum seekers from other countries such as Myanmar, Syria, Maldives, Iran and Palestine. The study revealed that the main mode of asylum seeker arrival is through air. The count of unmarried population was greater than the married population in the sample. Only 12 individuals were married, whereas 26 were unmarried. This result was due to the higher fraction of children in the sample.

Socio-economic factors such as the professional and educational background of the asylum seekers were examined. Majority of the sample, had been unemployed. Some were from agrarian backgrounds, and the others had been engaged in businesses. It was revealed that the majority of asylum seekers were suffering from poverty. They were from the lower socio-economic strata of the society. Majority of the sample had not obtained a proper education in their home country i.e. the majority had not attend school. Some have primary and secondary level education. This was due to both the poor economic status of their families, as well as their victimization which resulted in their refugee status.

In-depth interviews of the study showed that asylum seekers are likely to migrate along with their family members. However, the study further revealed that they do not like to have a good rapport or to build a community with other detainees in the camp. There are certain salient push factors identified from the sample which caused them to leave their homes and to integrate in to asylum countries. Those factors are mainly Ethnic crisis due to belonging to an ethnic minority, religious conflicts, political opinions and involvement in criminal activities.

In-depth interviews further revealed that asylum seekers have the common expectation of living free of the threats posed to their lives. Mainly they are looking forward to seeking refuge in a contracting state and resettling in countries that provide them safety. On the other hand, some are willing to voluntarily return to their home countries after being ensured of their safety and rights. Certain other asylum seekers are integrated in a country of asylum under the mandate of UNHCR.

Conclusion

The results of the study conducted on the asylum seekers at Mirihana lead to the following conclusions: the migration of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka occurs mainly from Pakistan, Afghanistan and to a lesser extent from other countries such as Myanmar, Nigeria, Iran and Bangladesh. Asylum seekers migrate to Sri Lanka mainly by air arrival modes and in certain incidents by sea arrival modes. Most of the asylum

seekers are from poor economic backgrounds, and often have a history of low education and unemployment. Age-wise, the largest fraction among the asylum seekers are children under 10 years. The majority of asylum seekers are unmarried and are incorporated into extended families. Most of the asylum seekers arrived in Sri Lanka due to ethnic crises in their home countries. Such asylum seekers belong to persecuted ethnic minorities. In addition, there are other reasons as religious conflicts, persecution due to political opinions, membership in specific social groups and involvement in criminal cases in their home country. Most of them hope to resettle in a wealthier contracting state such as USA, Canada and UK while some are willing to voluntarily repatriate to their home countries. There are negative effects on Sri Lankan society from asylum seekers in relation to social effects, cultural effects and mainly the burden posed on the economy of the country.

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