

BACKGROUND OF STUDY: INFORMATION ABOUT MALAYSIA AND SOME NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

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Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia. It comprises of Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak. Both Sabah and Sarawak located in the northern part of the island of Borneo. Malaysia is a multi-racial country with a population of approximately 22.2 million. The Malays together with the indigenous peoples form the majority, followed by Chinese, Indians and Others. A very diverse indigenous group of people live in Sabah and Sarawak.

The standard of living in Malaysia is one of the highest in Southeast Asia in comparison to the other neighbouring countries in the region. The country is rich in natural resources such as palm oil, rubber, tin, petroleum, natural gas and timber. Malaysia is the largest producer of palm oil in the world and ranks third as a producer of natural rubber. Petroleum is the country's main foreign exchange earner, followed by timber. Malaysia has progressed into a nation that has diversified successfully to become one of the top exporters of manufactured goods such as petroleum and timber products, processed palm oil products, electronics, apparels and textiles.

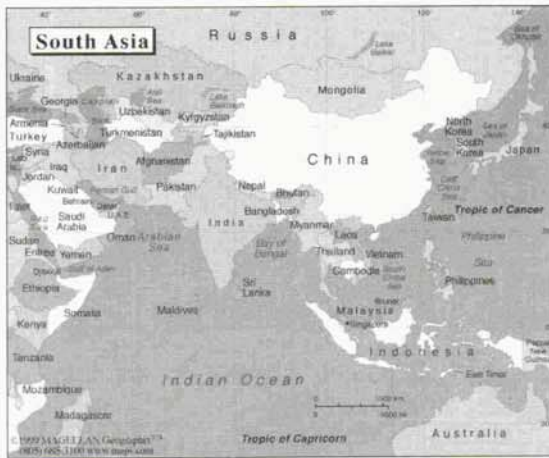


Figure 1. Countries of South Asia

Malaysia's buoyant economy has made it possible for the country to have a good infrastructure and communications, system which are essential for industrialization. With privatization of large industries, foreign investment in manufacturing has increased tremendously during the past decade. Malaysia's expanding industrial sector contributed to the 8% to 9% annual growth rate during the past decade (1987-1997). However, the country's limited labor force (9.6 million) was not ad-

equated to meet the needs of the growing industries so the government had to allow employers to bring in foreign workers to work in the factories and in the agricultural, service, domestic and construction sectors. Malaysia's economic and industrial expansion activities slowed down during the 1997-98 Asian financial crises. However, the country has slowly been showing signs of economic recovery since 1999.

The foreign workers in Malaysia are mainly from Indonesia (70%) and Bangladesh (24%) while a smaller proportion originate from the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar and other countries.

Indonesia is one of Malaysia's neighbours. Indonesia consists of more than fourteen thousand islands. The country has extensive natural resources but with a large and rapidly growing population of 228.4 millions and increasing at a rate of 1.6%, it remains a rather poor country. The prevalent economic conditions in Indonesia (see Table 1), such as her large labor force (99 million), high unemployment rate (15-20%), high inflation rate 9% and poverty are the "push factors" that encourage the Indonesian workers to find better employment and economic opportunities in Malaysia. Besides Indonesia's geographical proximity to Malaysia and the economic incentives in this country, the many similarities with regards to climate, culture, religion, food and language are some of the other factors that "pull" the Indonesians to work here. Inter-governmental cooperation between the two neighbouring countries has sorted out administrative and immigration procedures thus facilitating the movement of the legally registered foreign workers from Indonesia to Malaysia.

Foreign workers from Bangladesh form the second biggest group in Malaysia. Bangladesh is one of the poorest and most densely populated and least economically developed nations in the world. Political instability, lack of resources and natural hazards such as frequent cyclones and extensive flooding during the annual monsoons tend to hamper its economic development. The large and rapidly growing population (131.3 millions increasing at a rate of 1.6% annually), political instability, lack of economic opportunities and unfavorable economic conditions in Bangladesh (see Table 1

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and 2) have driven her people to find better employment opportunities in other countries including Malaysia. Bangladesh has a very large labor force (64.1 million) so it is not surprising that more than half of Bangladesh's GDP is generated through the service sector. One of Bangladesh's major export "commodities" is labour which brought in a lot of foreign exchange. Bangladesh exports labour to Malaysia and several countries in the Middle East. In 1998-99, it was estimated that workers' remittances amounted to US\$1.71 billion.

Foreign workers from Thailand, Philippines and Myanmar are also attracted to Malaysia because of the prevalent adverse economic conditions in their respective home countries. The characteristics common to all these three countries are large populations, surplus of labour force, poverty, high unemployment rates, poor economies and lack of employment opportunities (see Table 1 and 2). All these factors and the better economic environment here makes Malaysia a very attractive destination for workers from Thailand, Philippines, Myanmar and other economically deprived countries.

Objectives of the Migrant Studies Project:

Many quarters have expressed their concerns about the possibility of adverse effects on the health of the local population due to the presence of the large population of foreign workers in the country. Since there is no available data to assess these concerns, it was felt that it was appropriate to embark on a study to:

- (1) identify and assess the magnitude of health problems relating to foreign workers,
- (2) identify the prevalence of diseases (especially communicable diseases including emerging and re-emerging diseases) among foreign workers, identify the prevalence of diseases in relation to their occupations in the various sectors
- (3) identify the prevalence of diseases in relation to their occupations in the various sectors
- (4) assess the foreign workers health seeking behavior and utilization of health care resources in the public and private sectors

Table 1. Relevant Economic Indicators for Malaysia and Some Neighbouring Countries.

	Malaysia	Indonesia	Bangladesh	Thailand	Philippines	Myanmar
Population (July 2001 est)	22,229,040	228,437,870	131,269,860	61,797,751	82,841,518	41,994,678
Population growth rate	1.96%	1.60%	1.59%	0.91%	2.03%	0.60%
Land area (sq. km.)	329,750	1,919,440	144,000	514,000	300,000	678,500
Natural resources	petroleum, tin, timber, palm oil, rubber, natural gas	petroleum, tin, natural gas, rubber, minerals	natural gas, timber, coal	tin, rubber, natural gas, minerals, timber	timber, petroleum, minerals, salt	petroleum, timber, minerals, precious stones, natural gas, hydro-power.
GDP-2000 est. (purchasing power parity)	\$223.7 billion	\$654 billion	\$203 billion	\$413 billion	\$310 billion	\$63.7 billion
GDP per capita	\$10,300	\$2,900	\$1,570	\$6,700	\$3,800	\$1,500
Population below poverty line	6.80% ('97 est.)	20% ('98 est.)	36% ('95-'96 est.)	12.50% (1998 est.)	41% (1997 est.)	23% (1997 est.)
Inflation rate (2000 est.)	1.70%	9.00%	5.80%	2.10%	5%	18% (1999 est.)
Labor force	9.6 million (2000)	99 million (1999)	64.1 million (1998)	32.6 million (1997)	48.1 million (2000)	19.7 million (1998/99 est.)
Unemployment rate	2.80% (2000 est.)	15-20% (1998 est.)	35.20% (1996 est.)	3.70% (2000 est.)	10% (2000 est.)	7.10% (1997/98 est.)
Industrial production	12.10%	7.50%	6.10%	3%	4%	NA
Growth rate	(2000 est.)	(2000 est.)	(2000 est.)	(2000 est.)	(2000 est.)	
Literacy Rate	83.50%	83.80%	56%	93.80%	94.60%	83.10%

Source: CIA – The World Factbook. Internet Communication, May 3, 2002 at <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos>

Table 2 – Relevant Economic Indicators for Malaysia and Some Neighbouring Countries.

	Malaysia	Indonesia	Bangladesh	Thailand	Philippines	Myanmar
GDP – real growth rate (2000 est.)	8.6%	4.8%	5.3%	4.2%	3.6%	4.9%
GDP by sector	agric. 14% industry 44% services 42%	agric. 21% industry 35% services 4%	agric. 30% industry 18% services 52%	agric. 13% industry 40% services 47%	agric. 20% industry 32% services 48%	agric. 42% industry 17%
Household income:						
-lowest 10%	1.40%	3.60%	3.90%	2.50%	1.50%	2.80%
-highest 10%	20.40%	30.30%	28.60%	37.10%	39.30%	32.40%
Labor force by sector	tourism 28% manufacturing 27% forestry, agric. fisheries 16% services 10% govt. 10% construction 9%	agric. 45% industry 16% services 39%	agric. 63% services 26% industry 11%	agric. 54% industry 15% services 31%	agric. 40% govt & social services 19% services 18% manufacturing 10% construction 6% Others 8%	agric. 65% industry 10% services 25%
Industries	rubber, palm oil processing, manufacturing, electronics, petroleum production & refining, tin mining & smelting, timber logging & processing, agriculture processing, light manufacturing	Petroleum, gas, textiles, apparel food, footwear, mining, cement, chemicals, tourism, cement fertilizers, rubber, plywood	jute, cotton textiles, tea processing, garments, sugar,	Tourism, textiles, garments, tin, tungsten, Agric. processing, Tobacco, cement, plastics, jewelry, electronics, Furniture, beverages, light manufacturing	Textiles, food processing, electronics, pharmaceuticals, Chemicals, wood products, fishing and petroleum refining.	Agricultural processing, textiles, footwear, Wood products, copper, tin, iron, construction materials, pharmaceuticals, fertilizer

Source: CIA – The World Factbook. Internet Communication, May 3, 2002 at <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos>