

Bhutan's internal migration rate highest in South Asia

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An inevitable consequence of progress and not a bad thing at that



UNDP's Human Development Report 2009

October, 2009 - At six percent, Bhutan's internal migration rate is the highest in South Asia, according to UNDP's human development report (HDR) launched yesterday in Thimphu.

The main factor that triggers this movement is education and employment, said the works and human settlement minister Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba.

70,000 AND COUNTING ; The Capital may seem overcrowded but can actually accommodate many more

“Success in education is the most important reason. Migrants come in search of a better life and hence are highly motivated, hardworking and adaptive and provide labour for economic

development in more productive sectors,” said the minister.

Another report by the agriculture ministry in 2005 said that 41 percent of rural migrants to urban centres were women.

These figures, however, are not alarming, said the minister, because developing countries do face such movement of people. “Modern development isn't possible if people don't move and we can't stop it. It's a good thing and means that people are progressing.”

Bhutan's urban growth rate on an average today is more than seven percent. This has resulted in the reduction of work force in the agriculture sector, under-utilisation of established infrastructure in rural areas and housing shortage and unemployment in urban areas.

“We cannot and must not stop people trying to migrate. What's important is that people shouldn't be leaving because there's no basic infrastructure, but because of their free choice and thinking that they can do better elsewhere,” said Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba.

And although Thimphu has been facing serious water crises and housing shortage due to its ever-increasing population, the minister said that Thimphu can still grow and accommodate more people.

“Even if there's no space, people will still come. Also there's precious land that's not properly used in Thimphu. It's just that more people had come in before the facilities were ready,” said the minister. “Already there are about 70,000 people living in Thimphu and I think it should be able to accommodate its double.”

Bhutan today has more than 60 towns, including the small satellite towns. The flow of

migrants is at present from the east and centre to the west and south. The east and the border areas had not seen much development earlier because of the security problem. "But now that the security issue has improved, lots of developmental activities are focused there. Nganglam, for example, is going to be the main commercial hub for eastern Bhutan," said the minister.

People are not only moving from one district to another, but also from villages to semi-urban areas, and the minister is quick to point out that, in terms of basic facilities, the east is no worse than any other place in the country.

But the rate of flow is however a concern. "The speed at which the rural-urban migration takes place in Bhutan, however, calls for urgent and concerted mobilisation of efforts to address this issue," said the UNDP's resident representative, Claire Van der Vaeren during the launch.

The HDR suggests that adequate policies are needed to enable people to expand their choices and realise the potential gains of movement. The minister however said that the government remains committed to its rural development programme. "The entire future of Bhutan will be shaped by human migration, which will have enormous impact upon our culture, social relationship, economy and, ultimately, the transformation of the nation."

- 45 percent of migrants are between the ages of 16-30 years
- 63 percent of migrants had at least primary level education
- Migrants from rural areas constitute up to 72 percent of urban dwellers
- There are 37.3 thousand migrants in Bhutan, who represent 5.7 percent of the total population

Rural urban survey by MoA, 2005 & HDR, 2009

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