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On Return from UAE, a nation of migrant workers

It has been two months since I returned from UAE, and I would like to write about what I feel now. What I think about the most is not the desert, Arabs, religions nor the tree planting program I was involved in, but about migrant workers. The culture of UAE at present is characterized more by its multinational element comprised of workers from various countries lured there by oil dollars, rather than by Arabic and Bedouin culture. On a daily basis I communicated with people from countries such as India, Pakistan, Egypt, the Philippines and Syria, and even more so in my social life. The oil dollar has brought people from all over the world, out of the estimated population of 2.4 million, only 400,000 to 500,000 people, or about 20%, are said to actually be UAE nationals. Non-UAE nationals are mostly migrant workers, engaging in all sorts of occupations. They (including women) work in all levels of society and assiduously send their earnings to their families back home.

What surprises me is their cheerful attitude. From their faces, it is very difficult to imagine their difficult situations. Many of them came to the UAE, leaving their families behind. It is not hard to find people who have been working in the UAE for periods of 10 or even 20 years. It is not at all easy for those of them who come from societies which strongly value family ties; often more so than in Japanese society. They must have had the choice of staying in their home countries and supporting their families by doing traditional work in the fields but as the world economy encroached even into the rural agricultural areas of their home countries and raised the financial burdens on farmers to the degree that it became almost impossible to even send their children to school, they must have decided to go to Dubai, thinking it more realistic to earn real money in a relatively short time. I am sure that if they had an alternative which enabled them to stay with their families, very few of them would go to work in UAE by themselves. They must have had no choice. This "not having any choice" is an important factor to remember. In their home towns there are many people who are prepared to go to work abroad should they have sufficient funds to travel. Many of them are farmers without land and are earning a living through temporary agricultural work.

The UAE is not alone - many wealthy countries have a demand for cheap labour. The low cost of employing people from developing countries is due to the low economic status of these nations. The reason why these developing nations economies are weak is that these countries do not have strong industries capable of competing in the world market. However, it should not be the case that all nations should achieve economic development in the same way. Each nation must have its own shape of development. The economic status of a country tends to be used to evaluate the country and even individuals from that country. Many would deny this, however, as far as labour costs go, the "value" of the migrant workers is very small.

(Reported by Abe)



Plantation workers from Pakistan (right) and Bangladesh (left): The plantation owner lives in town and the daily work is done by these workers. Their monthly salary is about DH 500 (15,000 yen).



A worker from Afghanistan on a government farm: Government pay workers around DH 1,500 (45,000 yen) per month. The salary is much better than on private farms although the duties are very similar.