

**M**ORE than 20 years ago, a group of Bangladeshi workers turned up at *The Star* office in Seremban to complain that they had been cheated by a fellow countryman and a Malaysian agent who had fled with their passports and their money after promising to get them jobs in Malaysia.

They had each paid the job agent in Bangladesh a princely sum of US\$1,000 (RM3234) to secure jobs legally in Malaysia and a further US\$5,000 (RM16,168) for tickets and a work permit.

They were met on arrival at the airport by another Bangladeshi and a Malaysian.

These Bangladeshi workers were promised jobs like waiters, factory workers and even clerks – all of them were university graduates and one was even doing his PhD.

However, when they arrived here, they were sent to an estate in Bahau where they had to slog it out in the heat and sun.

These people were not made for such jobs and thus they suffered.

On top of that, the Malaysian agent took all their salaries to compensate for his expenses.

They were given limited food and the 20 were crammed into a single-storey house.

They finally approached *The Star* when their food ran out and the Malaysian agent failed to appear for several days.

The group appointed Qadir, the guy pursuing a PhD, as their spokesman.

Their story made it to the newspaper and shocked everyone then, because 20 years ago foreign workers from Bangladesh were a rarity and being mistreated was even 'rarer' still.

Everyone, from the police to Immigration officers, was very helpful to Qadir and his friends.

Some sent rice and food, while one contractor even offered them jobs.

About 10 of them took up the offer and the helpful immigration officials arranged their work permit transfer.

Several months later, after they had returned home, Qadir wrote me a letter to thank us for our help and express their gratitude to all who had been kind to them.

However, he confessed that some of his countrymen who had been cheated like him

# Built on foreign backs

## Mistreating foreign workers is as bad as chasing out rich tourists.



had made a second attempt to get into the country via Thailand.

That was the first time we reported how Bangladeshis were getting into Malaysia.

Fast forward to the present day. Nothing much has changed as there are hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis in our country as migrant workers, most of them illegals.

What has changed is that we are no longer sympathetic to these foreign workers when they are cheated.

Look at those working at the new Istana Negara that cost over RM1bil.

*The Star* reported that many of the foreign workers had not been paid, and were subject to harassment from enforcement units every time they complained to the authorities.

The sad outcome from our report on the unpaid Istana workers is that the majority will be rounded up by the authorities and deported to their countries soon.

The main contractor and sub-contractor will not be really bothered, because deported employees need not be paid.

Instead of being sympathetic to them, many expressed disgust that the expensive palace was being built by foreigners.

»Malaysians tend to forget that it was the immigrants who brought about the greatest development of our country«

The fact that they work very hard escapes most of us.

The Works Ministry, responsible for monitoring all Government contract works, however, threatened the contractors and sub-contractors with being blacklisted, if they had indeed not paid their workers or were hiring illegal foreign workers.

Let's be honest. There had been NO development project – private or government – of any significance in our country in the past 20 years that had been untouched by an illegal foreign worker.

I dare say that our rapid physical develop-

ment was built on the backs of the two million to four million foreign workers, legal and illegal.

Instead of being grateful, we blame them for all manner of ills.

We blame them for crime, we blame them for stealing our daughters and wives, we blame them for stealing our jobs.

We, it seems, are blameless.

So, when Indonesians get upset when their fellow citizens in Malaysia are harassed by the authorities, abused and cheated by their employers, we tend to shrug our shoulders and wonder why they are so angry.

The truth is most of the street crime is not committed by illegal foreign workers who are here to eke a living; our wives and daughters eloping with them, its something called mutual love; and they are stealing no jobs from us because no Malaysian wants to sweep the streets, collect the garbage or lay bricks.

To our Asean neighbours like Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam and Laos, supplying labour to other countries is a major industry.

The same can be said of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The foreign exchange that their millions of workers earn, pays for development in their own countries.

Our dependency on these migrant workers means a significant loss in foreign exchange, but I think this is one cost we have no choice but to accept because our own physical development will head nowhere without them.

All of us Malaysians tend to forget that it was the immigrants who brought about the greatest development of our country in the past 100 years and we should honour their memory and sacrifices by treating the present day migrant workers – legal and illegal – fairly.

Why not?

After all we have gained greatly from their hard work as most of modern Malaysia's physical development was built on their backs.

*Executive Editor Wong Sai Wan is very grateful to his foreign maid for helping to raise his two children for the past 11 years.*