

Reaping demographic dividend

In the not-too-distant future, entire Europe and Japan where wages are the highest will be needing skilled workers from Bangladesh, writes **Rahman Jahangir**

BANGLADESH, an overpopulated country, now has a unique chance to exploit huge potential, unlocked by increasingly ageing population in Europe and Japan. If the political leadership at the helm of affairs can take pragmatic action plans, the country will reap a 'demographic dividend' as Syrian refugees are getting now into Germany. According to international wire services, Germans welcomed the Syrians as they felt the refugees will one day meet their severe skilled labour shortage.

As many feel Bangladesh's population, growing at a rate of 1.30 - 1.40 per cent annually, is a burden on the nation, in reality this vast population could be transformed into precious human resources. Increased supply of skilled labour force will bring in record remittances for the South Asian country. Since the developed countries cannot replenish their labour force on their own because of their negative growth rate, Bangladesh has the opportunity to fill those gaps and earn foreign currencies by exporting its human resources.

In the not-too-distant future, entire Europe and Japan where wages are the highest will be needing skilled workers from Bangladesh. They are dedicated and hard working, Gulf countries say.

Experts say, with a growth rate of 1.34 per cent per annum, 1.8 to 2.0 million people are being added to the total population of Bangladesh every year. The projection also shows that the population is likely

to grow up to 222 million around 2051, and stabilise at 250 million by 2081. As one leading expert said, "Despite the substantial decline in the growth rate, the built-in population momentum due to young age structure will keep forcing its number to increase very rapidly for years to come." Currently, more than 35 per cent of the total population is below 15 years of age and the largest proportion of young population ever is waiting to enter the reproductive age.

A Reuters survey predicted that the working-age population of Germany - Europe's biggest economy - is expected to shrink by 6.3 million by 2030 as the country's overall population dwindles from 82 million to 65-70 million by 2060. Policymakers are warning of a looming shortage of skills that the Cologne-based IW institute has estimated is already costing 22 billion euros (\$27 billion) a year.

Germany has an acute deficit of workers with adequate qualifications in maths, computing, science and technology. For now, German multinationals can compensate by luring talent from abroad and adjusting working conditions to retain older staff. But the millions of companies which employ six out of 10 German workers and often have their headquarters in rural settings are finding it hard to compete. Bangladesh's faster progress in information communication technology (ICT) will act as a bonanza. Creating some 120,000 new jobs a year, Europe could face a shortage

of more than 800,000 skilled ICT workers by 2020.

According to a projection by a European think-tank, 20 years from now there will be more than 200 million unfilled jobs for skilled workers around the world. And the demographic changes now under way mean 50 million of these vacancies will be in Europe. Many of the EU's member-states, notably Germany, the UK and Belgium, are already faced with shortages of qualified staff in the health sector as well as in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) professions.

What will be badly needed are additional language skills. English has become the lingua franca for businesses. For those whose first language is English, being able to speak a second or third language with any ability will be prized.

On the other hand, Japan's labour force consists of more than 65 million workers, but Japan is the world's most aged society. According to some estimates, the country will be facing a demographic crisis, with the population shrinking to 87 million by 2060, down from its current 127 million. By then, 40 per cent of the population could be 65 or older. To help combat the impending labour shortages, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe continues to introduce economic reforms, including adding more women, more entrepreneurs and more expatriates to Japan's workforce.

The recent launching of a five-year long 'Skills for Employment

Investment Programme (SEIP)' in Bangladesh indicates that the government is aware of huge potential for employment of the country's skilled workforce abroad. The finance ministry is executing the project. Funded by the Asian Development Bank, the \$1.0 billion project is targeted to generate skilled manpower both in private and public sectors as well as to help them get better jobs and salaries.

The SEIP aims at supporting training of 1.5 million Bangladeshis, including training of new entrants, and up-skilling of those already working during the project span from 2014 to 2021, through associations of textile and clothing, leather and footwear, ship-building, light-engineering, construction and IT. Some 2,60,000 people will be trained by 2017, of whom about 70 per cent will be provided with gainful jobs. The BGMEA, under the project, will provide training to some 43,800 people, especially for entry-to-mid-level positions in garment factories.

Needed at this time is an integrated approach merging the Department of Technical Education, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training and the Bangladesh Industrial Technical Assistance Centre. Providing skills to manpower indeed is a vast and comprehensive issue needed to be handled by a separate ministry with dynamic and dedicated technical personalities running it.

arjayster@gmail.com