

# In solidarity with Sri Lankan migrant workers fleeing Italy

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A group of Sri Lankans released from military quarantine board a bus on March 29, 2020.

In the wake of Covid-19, countries around the world are moving to close their borders and locking their citizens in their homes in an attempt to stop or slow down

the infection. For the past few days, my Facebook feed has been full of disturbingly unfriendly, unwelcome posts about Sri Lankan nationals coming home and risking the country's well-being. Those running away from Italy, the new coronavirus hotspot, are especially highlighted.

This is particularly heartbreaking because many of these migrant workers are undocumented, spent their life savings on smugglers and risked their lives in order to get to their destination. After getting to Italy, they have to live in the darkness and in fear, every day, of being caught and deported, not to mention exploited, raped, robbed and unable to report it or defend themselves.

### **History of undocumented Sri Lankan migrant workers in Italy**

Sri Lankan migrants have been traveling to Italy since the 1970s. In the past, Italy has been deeply nationalist and not allowed foreign nationals, specifically non-Europeans, to settle down. Yet it allows migrant workers to work in the dark in order to exploit their cheap labor.

I remember growing up in Sri Lanka in the 1980s and 1990s. People I knew in the village and city would come home from Italy with new electronics and refrigerators and, of course, show off Italian-fashion clothing. This was the time Sri Lanka barely had its electric grid in place. Many of us didn't have electricity in the house.

Over the years, it has become harder and harder to travel to Italy, mainly because, like any other Western nation, it had heightened its border security and started cracking down on undocumented migration. So the travel becomes more deadly by the day, as we hear many horror stories of people traveling inside shipping containers, etc.

### **Boeing 747 hijacking case of Sepala Ekanayake**

There was the famous case of [Sepala Ekanayake](#), a Sri Lankan national who was

married to a Italian national. They had a child. Ekanayake was denied a visa to stay in Italy and told he couldn't get one for six years. When he took the desperate measures to hijack an Alitalia Boeing 747 and demanded the return of his partner and child on June 30, 1982, Sri Lanka didn't have a law to prosecute Sri Lankan nationals in case of a hijack.

When the Italian government demanded the extradition of Ekanayake, the public rose against it. The Sri Lankan government had to pass a new law and make it retroactive in order to prosecute Ekanayake in the homeland. He was sent to jail for 40 years and was never allowed to see his partner and child again.

The reason I'm highlighting this case is to show the extent of the racism the Italian government carried out over the decades towards migrant workers.

### **Migrant workers, legal vs. 'illegal'**

I moved to the U.S. in 2000, winning the diversity green card lottery. In the legal sense, I had some form of defense since I had residency. Nevertheless, I was told to keep my head down, don't question authority and do my work without question, because I could lose my privileges at any time without warning. A simple case of arrest could cause denial of renewing visas.

Many of my countrymen have taken Western names in order for them to be more acceptable in the working environment. During my citizenship interview in 2008, the agent repeatedly asked me if I wanted to change my name. He insisted that I would have an easier time if I did so. I have experienced denial of employment/callbacks because of it. Most of the time my roommates who had Western names, if applying for the same job, did get a callback.

I was stopped by the Los Angeles Police Department multiple times while riding my bicycle to work and to college because I was going through a certain neighborhood

in the San Fernando Valley. I was denied work as a food service worker in the aftermath of 9/11 because I “looked like Osama.” Not to mention denial of visitor visas to immediate members of my family, whose only crime was living in a Third World country. This is, by definition, family separation and a violation of basic human rights. This was my experience as a so-called legal worker.

While I was living in Los Angeles, I saw many hundreds of undocumented migrant workers who wait in Home Depot parking lots looking for day labor. Seeing them never affected me the way it does now, because I was always struggling to get my own life going and didn’t really have the time to open my eyes. Truth is, the cycle I was pumped into didn’t allow me to see beyond what I was “supposed” to see.

### **A visit to Italy**

In 2011, during my college years, I had the opportunity to spend some time in Milan, Italy. Milan is now much more diverse, and younger generations of Milanese have welcomed this diversity. Nevertheless, you could still find those who live the invisible life in every corner.

I immediately started to recognize fellow countrymen. I could see how difficult life was just by seeing their behavior, how much they were being ignored by the residents there, who most of the time acted annoyed by them. I immediately drew parallels to migrant workers in the U.S.

Whenever I introduced myself to a stranger and saw their facial expression change when they found out I was from Sri Lanka, it made me feel very uncomfortable and strange. I knew exactly why they reacted differently. I started claiming “I’m from Los Angeles” just to avoid the awkwardness.

For the first time in my life I understood what kind of life migrant workers there have to live through in order for them to earn a few bucks, so they and their families

can have slightly better conditions in the future. As much as I had difficulty in the U.S., it was nothing (nothing!) compared to what they have to go through. In the big picture, none of us, legal or otherwise, were really welcomed here as we were forced into this hidden class.

## **Coming home**

In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak in Italy, while the country is overwhelmed with huge numbers of people infected, of course undocumented migrant workers would be the last to be treated. (I have yet to see a proclamation from the Italian government declaring that all people in the country are being taken care of.) On many occasions people fled Italy for fear that they would be arrested in the process of testing and could die while waiting in custody.

Who in the world wants to die alone, away from home, away from their loved ones? It makes absolute sense that their immediate reaction would be to run back home to the hands of loved ones. Expecting them to be aware of spreading a disease and risking the health of fellow countrymen would be unfair, and we wouldn't expect the masses who have been kept in the dark and shut out of society to understand this. Nobody in that situation really has the ability to think logically in these conditions; it is the responsibility of the governments.

These are failures of our governments, who we elect and give power to to defend us in difficult situations like this.

Around the world, there are many reports of countries' governments, both developed and underdeveloped, failing in the attempts at containing this pandemic. And there are many discussions about how much force can be used in order to contain it and the ethics of those decisions.

Mass media consistently miscategorize countries based on Western liberal biases in

these discussions. Most common would be putting states like the Saudi kingdom and Cuba in the same category. They do this on purpose in order to deceive the public and to maintain the status quo. But they do not elaborate on why the U.S. will continue to do business and sell weapons to governments like Saudi Arabia, which are notorious for international terrorism and heinous crimes in violation of human rights, while they sanction Cuba. If you cannot see the hypocrisy in this, I'm not sure what to tell you.

## **Cuba**

The news of the Cuban government letting a British cruise ship infected with Covid-19 dock is being shared through social media. Cuba, with all the difficulties of dealing with the U.S. embargo, has been the champion of the working class when it comes to providing health care to its own people and sending out an army of doctors internationally in crises like this. It's because, by definition, they understand the responsibility of a government to take care of its citizens and the well-being of its international compatriots. We can learn a lot from them.

If one looks closely at how Cuba runs its society, you would know they are nothing like so-called authoritarians but rather a genuine democracy with popularly elected officials. The difference is, their elections are not run by money from the corporations and the oil industry.

If you have seen the news lately, you know Cuban doctors have arrived in Italy to help handle the dire situation.

## **Sri Lanka**

It is clear that the Sri Lankan government was not prepared early enough to get a hold of the situation. Closing borders and implementing curfews can help slow the spread of the virus, but what are the human choices we can make during a crisis like

this?

At this point, we should consider Sri Lanka as a nation of migrant workers. There's practically no one there who doesn't have a family member who lives in another country or personally knows someone who lives abroad. While Western nations drain our natural resources and recruit the most skilled citizens, most of the others who leave by themselves to find better conditions do bring something back home.

There are many reports of Sri Lankan citizens returning home from Italy and going into hiding. Fear has grown that they are spreading the virus by doing so. So they might be. However, it is the government's responsibility to make them feel comfortable and educate the masses so they don't have a fear of being prosecuted or unfairly targeted, so they can come out and get treated, and so they can be isolated humanely.

We still have time to make things right. It is our responsibility to demand that we make things right and educate when our government doesn't get things right. It is also our responsibility to create a government that willingly listens and makes changes demanded by the people.

