

On My Mind
12/17/04

I left unfinished, in last week's column, comments regarding the United Nations' recently released report, "World Economic and Social Survey 2004." I had noted that in its chapter on the economic impact of international migration the report says that in the long run such migrations usually benefit both those who migrate, and the host country to which they come. Migrants not only provide a work force, but are themselves consumers, which creates a demand for more supplies and services - and a larger work force. They also fill jobs that host country "natives" are not willing to do.

There is another chapter on temporary migrations (as opposed to migration leading to assimilation). "Temporary Migration and its relation to Trade in Services" is at least as relevant and as important. While citing the advantages of the use of temporary workers to both host and home country - which are similar to the advantages of the use of migrant workers, this chapter notes that host fears remain that the use of temporary migrants is "just the first step towards permanent resettlement in the host country...." This sentiment tends to be correlated with a downturn in business cycles, the report continues, but shutting the door to the use of temporary workers reduces the country's growth potential and is unlikely to succeed in deterring people from migrating. It could even encourage illegal migration, which is much more difficult to control, the report states.

In acknowledging that such fears are legitimate, the report notes that "Temporary work programmes must recognize that some immigrants will move from being temporary to becoming more permanent and thus [they] must provide for such eventuality by channeling otherwise unauthorized migrants into legal status.

The report offers three principles in dealing with the issue: (1) how migrants are treated is a matter of government policy; (2) the overall economic benefits of moving workers over borders are positive since "individual migrants and their employers become better off and world gross domestic product (GDP) rises as more workers obtain higher-wage jobs;" and (3) "legal and orderly labour migration is best for all parties."

The report discusses several strategies for improving management of the situation, ranging from economic incentives for either the employer or the employee and using enforcement effectively, to finding ways to encourage migrant workers to return home.

The report is important to the CNMI for two reasons. In the first place, it makes clear that dealing with foreign workers is an issue shared world-wide - that it is not only the CNMI that struggles for the best way of managing them - the moral being, let's not re-invent the wheel here, let's consult with others with similar issues. In the second place, it offers perspectives and suggestions for re-evaluating present policy and practices in the CNMI towards its foreign workers - which could bring about a better understanding of just what the role of those workers is - and can be - in the CNMI. The report can be found on the web at:

<www.un.org/esa/policy/wess/wess2004files/part2web/chap5.pdf.>

The UN report is also relevant to what looks like becoming the “Dekada controversy.” The U.S. Department of Interior’s Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Office of Insular Affairs, David Cohen let it be known this week that foreign workers, calling themselves the Dekada, who are petitioning the U.S. Congress for U.S. permanent residence status, don’t stand a chance of succeeding.

Cohen referred to the Covenant between the U.S. and the CNMI in making his point. Though the Covenant gives the CNMI control over immigration into the CNMI, it does not, and cannot, give the CNMI any control over immigration into any of the rest of the U.S. he said. Dekada is asking for U.S. permanent residence status for workers who have worked continuously in the CNMI for at least five years.

While it would seem that the CNMI should, perhaps, extend to foreign workers who have worked in the CNMI continuously for at least ten years- and who expect to continue working here - some consideration, some voice in how they are “governed,” it is now clear that U.S. permanent residence is not the answer. (I believe five years is too short a period on which to base any claim.) And the CNMI Constitution prohibits increasing the class of “nonaliens.”

Whether the UN report addresses this specifically - I have not read the whole report - it does, as noted above, discuss management strategies. Perhaps in its pages, interpreted with some creativity on the part of CNMI policy-makers, a more workable solution can be found.

I also wrote, in last week’s column, of the caution by Pacific Asia Travel Association vice-president Peter Simone that the CNMI should take care not to “mix and match” Chinese and Japanese tourists - that they should not be housed in the same hotels, for example - because of their cultural differences. And I expressed the hope that here in the CNMI, such differences would be accommodated “in peace and tranquillity.”

A young Chinese man of my acquaintance, in talking about Simone’s warning, said he thought such an approach might offend the Chinese, that they might not find it acceptable to be housed in separate hotels. The Chinese should not be given different treatment than the Japanese, he said. What he said reminded me of the “separate but equal” doctrine that was once applied, in the mainland, in education circles and elsewhere in regard to how blacks were treated. It didn’t work because it never was equal. And from the looks of things, it shouldn’t be tried here either. Chinese tourists should be offered the same accommodations, the same access to services and facilities as is now offered the Japanese.

They might choose, for example, to stay at Tinian’s Dynasty Hotel, which is Chinese-owned - but the choice should be theirs. In actuality, until everyone gets his or her act together - the Federal Aviation Administration, the Transportation Security Administration, and Chinese airlines - and large commercial jets are finally allowed to land on Tinian, it probably won’t be possible to accommodate them on Tinian even if that’s what they wanted - they’ll have to come to Saipan, and perhaps at least lay over one night, before proceeding there.

It borders on the scandalous that now that - after years of delay - the Tinian runways have finally been extended to accommodate large jets, what appears to be bureaucratic red tape still prevents them from landing there.

Chinese officials have let it be known they expect tremendous opportunities and benefits as a result of China's relationship - presumably including tourist arrivals here - with the CNMI. The CNMI, in turn, should do its share to see that this new group of tourists be given every consideration.

One last hold-over from last week's column: a reader wrote in to say she was glad not to see lots of congratulatory ads re: Constitution Day from politicians. They pay for those ads out of our money, she said, when they could be making much better use of it, by sponsoring events that allowed public participation, rather than just advertising themselves in the paper. I confess I had not seen it that way. She has a point, but I would argue that those ads constitute a not insignificant portion of the newspapers' income, which allows them to continue serving us, and provides jobs to newspaper staff. And that's not such a bad way to spend our money....

With the New Year - and New Year's resolutions - fast approaching, a resolution I would offer to our lawmakers: Resolved that the battle for jurisdiction and control between island mayors, island municipal councils and legislative delegations be addressed once and for all through the appointment of a commission charged with studying the problem and coming up with a reasonable, affordable and acceptable solution. It was a battle when the Constitution was being drawn up, it was a battle at the 2nd ConCon - which resulted in significant change in the Constitution - and it is still contentious: witness the two legislative initiatives that have been introduced in this session to again amend the Constitution and change the powers and responsibilities of the mayors and municipal councils. But addressing it piece-meal is not the answer. Rather, the issue of where how much authority should be placed deserves a thorough and comprehensive examination.

The CNMI has its four "C" holidays. A former U.S. Senator has his own four "C"s. In a radio discussion of how Congress operates, Former Senate Majority Whip Alan Simpson was heard to say recently that U.S. lawmakers work together in a civil manner most of the time. But the media does not report that, instead waiting all day for a quote that will "stir the pot." Said Simpson, "They're interested in conflict, confusion and controversy, not clarity."

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Which leads right into the bumper-sticker saying: "The opposite of progress is congress."

Have a Happy Holiday!