

# MIGRANT WORKERS: RECRUITMENT AND TRAVELLING FROM INDONESIA TO TAWAU (SABAH) MALAYSIA

<sup>1</sup>Syed Abdul Razak Sayed Mahadi,\* <sup>2</sup>Hanafi Hussin,\*\* & <sup>3</sup>Abdullah Khoso\*\*  
(\*First author, \*\*Corresponding Author)

<sup>1</sup>Department of Anthropology and Sociology, <sup>2</sup>Department of Southeast Asian Studies, <sup>3</sup> Gender Studies Programme

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences (IOES)

University of Malaya

(hanafih@um.edu.my, syedabdrzak@um.edu.my,  
abdullahkhoso@hotmail.com)

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## Abstract

Migrant workers' recruitment and travelling from Indonesia to Tawau (Sabah), Malaysia is a serious matter, which has not been thoroughly assessed especially the role or help of local employers in Sabah and the (un)secret routes they use to bring the undocumented migrant workers to Sabah. This article is based on the Indonesia Labour Migration to Sabah (ILMS) Survey (in Syed Abdul Razak [2010]) conducted in 2009 and 2010, in which 896 migrant workers (both documented and undocumented) were interviewed. Also, informal interviews were conducted with employers, intermediaries and the officials in Malaysia and Indonesia. The article found that *mandors* and local brokers/village sponsors played an important role in the recruitment process of migrant workers. *Mandors* and local brokers (could be the village sponsors) worked within the social networks; they formerly linked employers with prospective migrant workers; while the brokers linked new migrants to institutional networks that operated through legal and unauthorised channels. However, the real demand or space for undocumented migrant workers was created from Sabah. The employers played an important role to sustain the problem of undocumented migrant workers. The study also found various factors, which facilitated migrant workers' movement to Sabah that included improvements in water transport and telecommunication systems, the long-established, familiar networks, and the availability of groups which provided fake documents. There was more inclination to use informal channels because of the cost and procedures, whereas the migrant workers willing to take any kind and

level of risk in search of livelihoods. The article concludes that for migrant workers, there was no clear distinction between legal and undocumented recruitment because the same people (*mandors*) arranged both things for them, but the real pull or demand came from the local people in Sabah.

*Keywords: migrant workers, recruitment, travelling, illegal, Tawau, Indonesia*

## **Introduction**

The term illegal migrant workers, illegal immigrants, undocumented migrant workers or 'irregular migrant workers' are usually used by the destination state to define the foreign nationals' status without the documents necessary under the immigration regulations to enter, live or work in the state (IOM, 2010, p. 7). In Malaysia, they are often referred to as "Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin" (PATI) or illegal immigrants (Kassim, 2005a). Estimating the actual number of foreign workers in Malaysia is difficult due to the presence of legal and illegal migrant workers who often bring their families, a trend that seems to be more apparent in Sabah than in Peninsular Malaysia (Kanapathy, 2006).

A conservative estimation by the Immigration Department of Malaysia (IDOM) was that there were between 500,000 and 1.8 million illegal workers in 2011 in Malaysia; however, employers' associations and trade unions believe the number is higher (Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011). Malaysia has a large number of illegal migrant workers mainly from Indonesian nationality (Devadason, & Chan, 2013). In Sabah, most of the illegal migrants come from Indonesia (Hugo, 2000; Kassim, 2005a). In 2009, in Sabah, 312,837 illegal migrants were registered with their dependents without documents (Mulia, 2011).

There are found many causes of an increasing number of illegal migrant workers, especially from Indonesia. Some researchers suggested that the problem existed because of the lack of knowledge among Indonesian migrant workers about the proper migration procedures, which make them more vulnerable to exploitation by intermediaries who operate illegal movement (IOM, 2010; Djelantik, 2011). Other researchers have pointed out at the higher cost of documented migration systems and also weaknesses in the immigration laws and procedures in Indonesia (Quinn, 2002; Morgan & Nolan, 2012), as well as in Malaysian laws and procedures (Wan Hassan & Dollah, 2011). In research on migration from Indonesia to Malaysia, the common factors which cause undocumented migration of workers include geographical proximity, similarities