

# Illegal Indonesian labour movement from Lombok to Malaysia

*Ida Bagoes Mantra*

**Abstract:** *Indonesia is one of Asia's major sources of international contract labour. However little is known about the patterns, causes and consequences of this movement. The present paper sheds some light on one of the major flows of undocumented migration out of Indonesia, from the island of Lombok to Malaysia. The paper examines the process of movement and the causes underlying it. Attention is paid to the role of social networks in that movement, as well as some of the effects of the movement on the migrants themselves, their families and villages of origin.*

**Keywords:** *Migration, undocumented, Indonesia, development*

In order to sustain livelihoods an increasing number of Indonesian families have long had to export members of their mainly male labour force. Working through well established middlemen who ply illegal channels thousands of Indonesian men work in Malaysia each year many becoming part of the well established social networks which facilitate the gaining of employment in the host country. Their remittances in turn have enabled families to build dwellings and accumulate capital that would be impossible without the presence of these enlarged albeit illegal labour markets. While there are benefits of such labour flows to both land rich Malaysia and a labour surplus Indonesia during times of economic crisis there is considerable pressure on the receiving country to reduce these flows. Despite the magnitude of both migration and remittances its illegal nature means that very little is known about the characteristics of this on-going resource transfer between the two neighbouring countries.

This paper focuses on the experience of migrants in the regency of Central Lombok and traces their migration patterns through the western route to Peninsular Malaysia. The characteristics of the economy of the villages, the patterns of the labour migration and the role which remittances play in the local economy is discussed. The paper begins with a background to the present movement, then describes conditions in the study area of Lombok island. This

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is followed by an account of the process of migration to Malaysia and by an assessment of its impact on the case study area.

## BACKGROUND

Movement of Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia has been an ongoing process since before World War II (Bahrin, 1967). This flow declined during the War and also during the period of the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia. However, it increased again after the relationship between the Indonesian government and Malaysian Kingdom normalised. From 1910 onwards, the British colonial government established plantations, mining and harbours, to exploit the resources in the Malayan Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak. However, the available local labour was in short supply and was also perceived to have a low work ethic. In order to solve the problem, the British adopted an open door policy which attracted labourers from areas like South China, the Philippines, India and Indonesia into Malaysia. This in turn compounded and made more visible the problem of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia (Mantra, 1995).

The flow of Indonesian migrant workers to the Malayan Peninsula experienced a sharp increase in the 1930s. The results of the 1950 Malayan population census indicated that there were 189,450 people born on the Island of Java (which represented an 111 percent increase over the 1930 figure). Besides that, the same census also revealed there were 62,200 people who originated from South Kalimantan (Banjar) and 26,300 people who came from Sumatra (mainly from West and North Sumatra), 24,000 people came from the Island of Bawean (East Java) and 7,000 people originated from Sulawesi (Hugo, 1993). These figures only represent the population situation in the Malay Peninsula but the number of workers entering Sarawak and Sabah was estimated to be more or less the same in number.

A migration network has been created between Indonesia and Malaysia which has facilitated the flow of workers between the two countries. In building its economy, Malaysia was faced with the problem of labour shortage, especially in the sectors which requiring unskilled labour. This situation has been made even worse by the fact that the Malaysian labour, especially those who have attained medium or high education, would not accept the low paid regimented work in plantations, mining and construction. On the other hand, Indonesia has faced a problem of excess labour because of the limited opportunities in the labour market and the low per capita wages.

The mobility of the Indonesian migrant workers can, therefore, be seen as a positive response to differentials in job opportunities. It is positive to Indonesia because job opportunities are still limited while on the side of Malaysia, the demand for labour, especially for blue collar jobs, is very crucial in the improvement of its national economic performance (Mantra, et al., 1997). The mobility of Indonesian migrant workers also can be seen as having a negative effect because of the loss suffered by Indonesia, especially in areas left by the migrants which are still in need of labour for their own developmental needs.

This is even worse when the migrants decide to completely settle in Malaysia. For Malaysia (particularly in the case of illegal Indonesian migrant workers), there is a large burden upon government services. Various security, social disintegration and other problems may also arise.

## LOMBOK ISLAND

Lombok Island in the province of West Nusatenggara, Indonesia is the major source of migrant workers to Malaysia. The research area itself is, the regency of Central Lombok, which covers 1427.65 sq. km and is comprised of nine subdistricts, five *kelurahan* (city villages) and 81 villages with the regency headquarters located at Praya. Topographically, the regency can be divided into three categories, the northern, central and southern. The northern part of Central Lombok is a highland area which is at the foot of Rinjani Mountain and includes the subdistricts of Batuk Liang, part of the Jonggat subdistrict and Pringgarata subdistrict. This area has high potential for the development of agricultural, animal husbandry, plantation farming, fisheries and tourist activities because of the supportive natural conditions. For example, there is a source of flowing water, fertile soils ideal for agriculture and a beautiful natural environment and the area also has a well developed transportation infrastructure.

The central part is a lowland which includes Praya subdistrict, part of Jonggat, West Praya, East Praya and the subdistrict of Janapria. This area has irrigated agricultural lands and rain fed lands, most of which produce rice and other non-rice crops. The southern part is a very hilly area which is composed of Pujut subdistrict, part of West Praya subdistrict and part of East Praya subdistrict. This is generally a dry area with only one rice growing season a year except for very specific areas. After rice is harvested, other non-rice crops can also be grown once. Rainfall in this southern part of Central Lombok can generally be categorized as low, followed by late rain seasons which usually clear very early. This situation interrupts the farming process and harvest failures are common (Herawati, 1996).

Although it is administratively part of Central Lombok, the research area (Janapria), is characteristic of the southern part of the regency. Agricultural productivity is falling, production is very limited and there are frequent harvest failures. As a result food shortages are common and to overcome this problem, most people end up looking for employment elsewhere including Western Malaysia. The level of education is still low, with 85 percent of the population aged 10 and above having an had an educational attainment of elementary school or below. Only 15 percent have had intermediate and high school education and only 0.46 percent have a university education.

These problems are compounded by population growth. With a population of 678,746 people in 1990 the population Central Lombok had risen to 713,614 by 1994, see Table 1. Under these conditions men have to leave to look for better paying jobs elsewhere a feature reflected in the low sex ratios shown in Table 1.

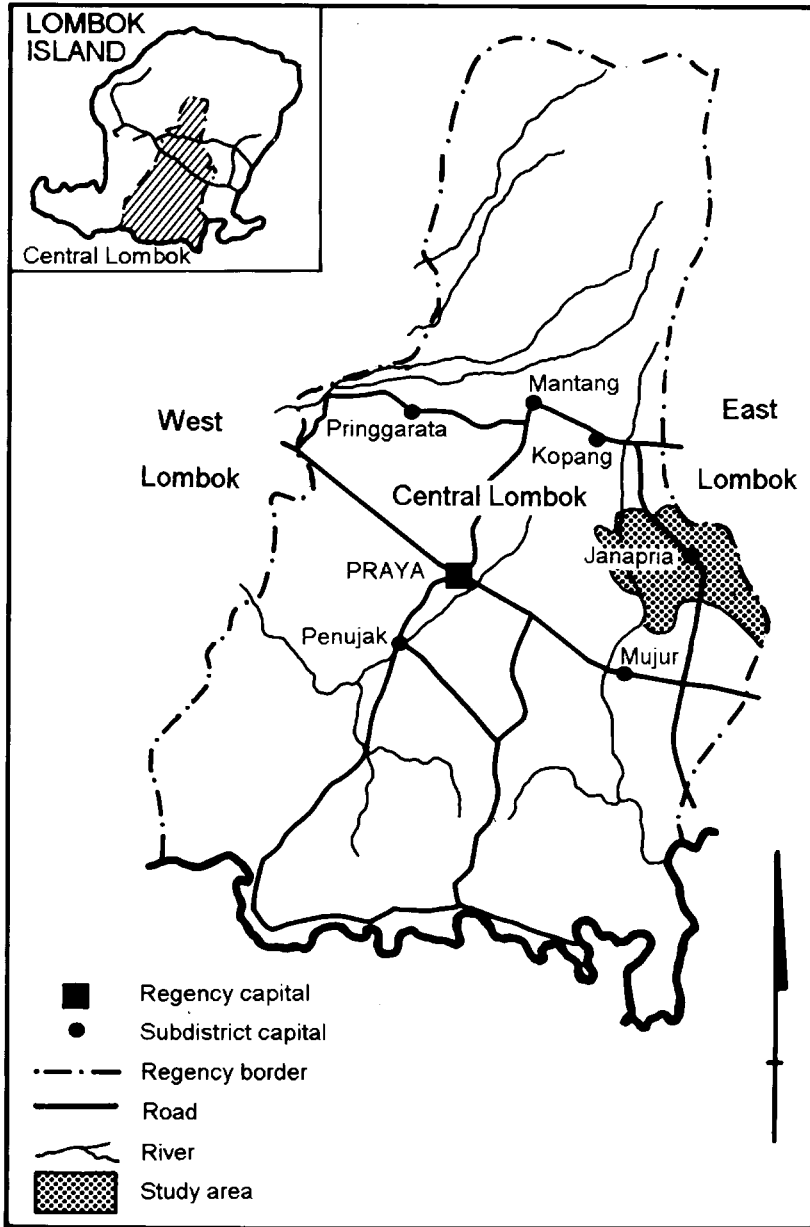


Figure 1. Lombok

### THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION TO MALAYSIA

Beside the poor natural conditions, wages paid in Central Lombok are usually very low. By contrast, as Table 2 shows, jobs in Malaysia, especially in mining, plantation and construction sectors pay several times higher. Of the households in Central Lombok 200 sent migrants to Malaysia and 163 contained return

**Table 1.** Population distribution of central Lombok Regency, according to subdistricts and sex, 1994

Subdistricts	Male	Female	Total	Sex Ratio
West Praya	47,895	51,878	95,777	92.3
Pujut	38,901	40,448	77,247	96.7
East Praya	24,504	25,978	50,478	94.3
Janapria	27,526	30,084	57,610	91.5
Kopang	30,729	35,064	65,793	87.6
Praya	63,787	63,716	132,503	100.1
Jonggat	34,673	44,735	76,504	77.5
Pringgarata	24,195	26,614	50,810	90.9
Batuk Liang	48,336	54,554	102,790	88.6
Total	340,546	373,068	713,614	91.3

Source: Central Lombok District in Figures, 1994

**Table 2.** Wage differences between Indonesia and Malaysia

Year	Area of Origin	Local Wage Rate	Wage Rate in Malaysia	Percentage Difference
1990	Lombok	Rp 500–Rp 1000/day	Rp 7000–Rp 8000/day (Plantations)	8000
1982	Bawean	Rp 500/day	Rp 9000/day	1800
1991	Semarang	Rp 2500/day	Rp 10,800/day (Sarawak)	432
1990	Indonesia	Rp 1000/day	Rp 10,000/day	1000
1984	East Java	Rp 3000/day	Rp 9000 day	300

Source: Hugo (1993)

**Table 3.** Principal reasons why people in Central Lombok sought employment in Malaysia

Reason for Migration to Malaysia	Total	Percent
Economic	137	84.0
Family	2	1.2
Recruited by a Taikong	20	12.3
Drought (Natural Calamities)	4	2.5
Total	163	100.0

Source: Field data

migrants. It is hardly surprising therefore that when asked for reasons why they migrated to Malaysia, more than 80 percent indicated economic reasons (see Table 3). The pressures were particularly strong for those with only elementary education (see Table 4).

Indonesian migrants who work abroad can be divided into two broad categories, those who move through a formal (legal) and those who migrate through an informal (illegal) channel. Formal arrangements for international labour migration are coordinated by the Indonesian Department of Labour (Hugo, 1995). This process is a lengthy and time consuming one which

**Table 4.** Level of education of the return migrants from Malaysia to Central Lombok

Education Level	Total	Percentage
Never completed elementary school	63	38.7
Completed elementary school	57	35.0
Completed intermediate school	24	14.6
Completed high school	19	11.7
Total	163	100

Source: Field data

involves the prospective migrant often in travelling a considerable distance to the nearest government processing centre. It also involves payment of a number of costs, many of them unofficial, at various stages of the process. Many potential migrants instead seek an alternative, illegal route to secure work abroad because it is cheaper, faster and less complicated.

The numbers of Indonesians travelling abroad to seek work on an undocumented basis far outnumber those going under legal auspices. Many use the services of one of the hundreds of middlemen (*taikong*) who offer an alternative service at a lower cost which can even be paid after acquiring employment. The way intending migrants are recruited by these middlemen has almost been socially legitimised by the communities there, so that their operation goes almost unhampered and it is difficult for a potential migrant not to rely on them.

The mobility of Indonesian migrant workers from Central Lombok has been going on for a very long time and many are known to have permanently settled in Malaysia even though many of them still maintain relationships with their areas of origin. These pioneering migrants constitute a very important source of information about availability of job opportunities in the destination area. Newly arrived migrants in Malaysia are also usually initially assisted and settled by the pioneer migrants and the pioneers, many of which still have a strong blood relationship, are also active in seeking jobs for the newcomers. Nevertheless, most migrants from Central Lombok use the services of middleman (*calo* and *taikong*). Even so, the chances are high that they will face problems with authorities in Malaysia sometimes ending up with arrests and deportation (see Table 5).

Most of the movement from Central Lombok is to the Western part of Malaysia. Motor boats are usually chartered by the illegal migrants or the *taikong* to transport them to Malaysia. During day time they usually wait in hidden harbours in small islands in the Archipelago. The illegal migrants get onto the boats at nightfall and they are then transported to an isolated harbour in West Malaysia. On arrival, the middlemen receive them and distribute them to the employers who are in need of workers.

Remittances from those who work in Malaysia have a significant economic impact on the family remaining in Central Lombok. Without a member acquiring employment in Malaysia, it is inconceivable for a family to construct a house, purchase a domestic animal or buy land for cultivation. For this

**Table 5.** Source of assistance in securing employment in Malaysia for migrants from Central Lombok

Sources of Assistance	Total	Percent
Self	4	2.5
Family	10	6.1
Friend/Neighbour	23	14.1
Middlemen/taikong	126	77.3
Total	163	100

Source: Field data

**Table 6.** The process for decision-making to look for employment in Malaysia, according to household heads in Central Lombok

Making the Decision	Total	Percent
Family	54	26.0
Parents	82	39.4
Wife/husband	39	18.8
Middlemen	23	11.0
Alone	10	4.8
Total	208	100

Source: Field data

reason, therefore, young people are usually encouraged by the family members and relatives to go and look for employment in Malaysia. Wives and children left behind by their husbands and fathers usually become the responsibility of the other family members. In Central Lombok, men are even encouraged by their wives to go to Malaysia for employment. While the migrant household heads reveal that the initiative to go to Malaysia is usually taken by the intending migrant her or himself, the decision is usually a consensus of the entire family members, parents, wife or husband (see Table 6).

For people in poor areas like Central Lombok employment in Malaysia is the only hope of improving on their household economic welfare. Workers want to minimise the delay in taking up work in Malaysia and wish to get away as quickly as possible because of their ever-mounting domestic economic needs. Illegal Indonesian migrant workers usually enter Malaysia through one of two routes, an eastern route and the western route. The western route or 'Peninsular Malaysian System' involves illegal migrants originating from East Java including Bawean Island, North Sumatra, Aceh, West Sumatra (Minangkabau), Central Java, West Nusa Tenggara (mainly from the regency east of Central Lombok) and is directed to West Malaysia.

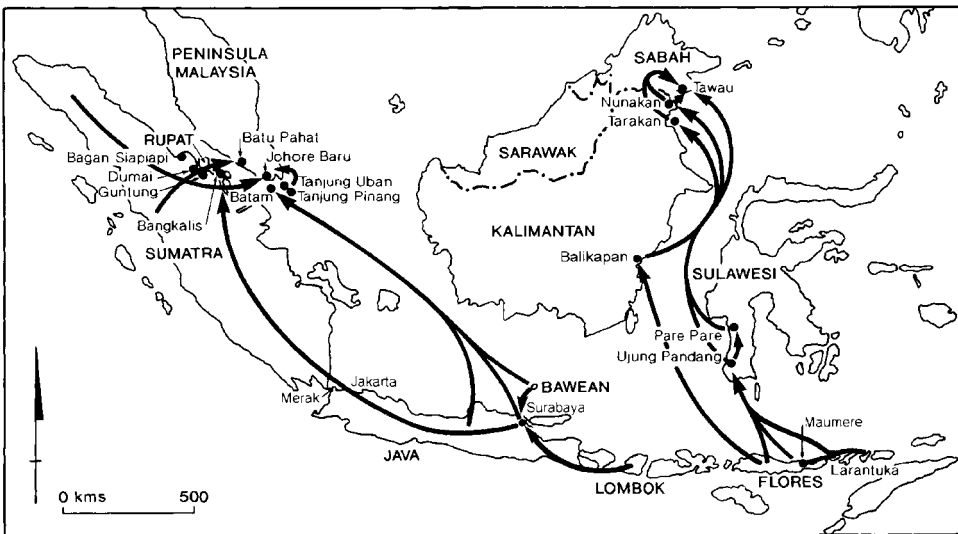
There are various routes to enter the Malakan straits through the west; the first is through the ports in the Islands of Riau like Bengkalis, Dumai, Rupat and Bagan Siapiapi, entering the western coast of Johor and then docking at Pontian and Batu Pahat. A journey through this route takes one night. The

second is through Tanjung Pinang and Tanjung Uban in the islands of Riau or Batam near Singapore, then proceeding through Johor Sea (Pangarang, Guntung, Johor Lama and Langsat Gulf). This journey requires approximately three hours to complete. For the Indonesian migrant workers particularly from East Java there is a third route involving first, travel to Bawean Island and from there, the middlemen meet them and then illegally manoeuvre them into the country.

The 'Eastern Malaysian System' is usually followed by the illegal Indonesian migrant workers from South Sulawesi and East Flores in East Nusa Tenggara. These intending migrants usually first go to Ujungpandang, then to Pare-pare where they join other migrant workers and move on to Nunukan Island in East Kalimantan. It is from here that they cross to Tawau (Sabah in East Malaysia). This route is more dangerous compared with the western route and takes up to four days. There are also other Indonesian migrant workers from East Flores who go directly to Balikpapan from where they then go to Tarakan, Nunukan and to the border at Tawau in Sabah (Figure 2).

**IMPACTS ON THE AREA OF ORIGIN**

There are two forms of Indonesian workers who go to Malaysia, the non-permanent (circular) which make up the bulk of migrants and a relatively much smaller group of permanent migrants. With their stronger relationship with their areas of origin, non-permanent migrant workers are highly consciousness of time spent away and aim to earn as much pay as possible while using as little as possible in their places of destination. These remittances can be in the form of money, in kind or ideas carried by the return migrants to their places of origin.



**Figure 2.** Main migration routes of illegal immigrants from Indonesia to Malaysia



One of the problems encountered in computing or estimating the size of remittances made by these migrants is the uncoordinated nature of remitting. There are many ways of remitting from Malaysia to the areas of origin. Some migrants do so through the bank, through friends returning back home and most carry substantial remittances when returning home. Indeed, interviews with respondents (return migrants and heads of migrant households) gave conflicting figures about these remittances and a lot of uncertainty was also expressed. The amount remitted, however, can be estimated by looking at what that money is used for in the home areas.

Improvement in housing is an important element in the investment of remittances but remittances are staged in small amounts. As a result a new phenomenon of constructing houses in stages has developed; the money brought may only be enough to put up a foundation or other parts of the building and the migrant must, therefore, go back to Malaysia to earn more money to complete the building. Sometimes, the remittances sent or carried from Malaysia are only enough to renovate the outer part of the house whereas the inner part must wait for another shift.

Besides being used for the construction of houses or renovation of an existing house, remittances are also used to pay debts, and for education. Besides constructing or renovating a house, the money carried home can also be used to purchase a motorcycle to start an *ojek* business and there are also those who use the remittances to buy radios, TV sets and tape recorders. It is very easy to know which family has a member working in Malaysia and which one does not. Families with members working in Malaysia have renovated their house although those houses may be quiet and unoccupied, but they nevertheless appear attractive, modern and clean.

Although there is evidence of improvement in household economic welfare, they are nevertheless below the expectations of the family members. Being illegal immigrants they are, therefore, often exploited by middlemen and can only set themselves free by buying their freedom.

Apart from the physical impacts, the mobility of Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia has also had some non-physical impacts. This mobility is associated with a social-cultural transformation which brings about a change in individual perspectives and social roles particularly in the relationship between generations. The migration has produced an increase in the incidence of divorce, especially in the families left behind by migrants. This is becoming a cultural *aib* (shame) which in some cases brings about conflict in the communities concerned.

## CONCLUSION

The longstanding movement of Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia is a classic case of a chain of migration process whereby earlier migrants have facilitated the movement of later migrants. The sharp economic and demographic contrast between the two countries has made the movement of Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia difficult to contain or prevent and it is

expected that the number of Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia will increase with time, the effects of the onset of the economic crisis in 1997 notwithstanding.

Almost all Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia, especially those from Central Lombok regency, go to Malaysia through illegal channels because the legal procedure according to the migrants is too intricate and consumes too much time and money. All Indonesian migrant workers who move illegally are exposed to considerable risk of exploitation at a number of stages of the migration process and because they are undocumented, they cannot access support or protection from government sources.

The remittances carried back home by the return migrants to their areas of origin are not large. This keeps them returning to Malaysia to work for more money. However, these remittances still help to improve the household economic situation in Lombok. This is a positive impact but there is also a negative impact, namely the loss of potential labour force in the area of origin and some social breakdown in families.

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