

Iraq – Sri Lanka Strengthening Relationships



With the Iraqi economy seeing rapid growth with a significantly improved security situation, the opportunities available for both employment and investment are great. Sri Lankans have the ability in both spheres. Nassar Al-Rubaiee, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs was in Sri Lanka to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on bilateral cooperation in the field of Employment between Iraq and Sri Lanka. And as such the MoU signed between the two countries provides a legal framework for Sri Lankan skilled workers and professionals in selected fields to work in Iraq with dignity where their rights are protected. As explained by the Minister, it is an agreement between the two Governments and as such the safety of the employee is ensured. He stressed the importance of the relationship between the two countries where the MoU signed recently will further enhance this relationship as both countries forge ahead as post-conflict nations.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe Photography Menaka Aravinda

What is the purpose of your visit to Sri Lanka?
The Minister of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare visited Iraq last year and during this time we had negotiations relating to Sri Lankan skilled workers coming to Iraq. Following approval from my Government and the Prime Minister, my visit to Sri Lanka was to sign the MoU on behalf of my country. Now, that the MoU has been signed between Sri Lanka and Iraq, Sri Lankan workers can now enter Iraq legally within the provisions of the MoU.

From which sectors will Iraq be seeking skilled workers from Sri Lanka?
It will depend on the industry of the company in Iraq that is seeking employees from Sri Lanka. The MoU signed between the two countries is to primarily allow Sri Lankan workers to enter Iraq legally, where they will be protected by law. Companies that employ Sri Lankan workers will have to comply with the rules and regulations that are stipulated in the MoU.

There are many opportunities for Sri Lankan workers because they are trained well in their respective trade in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has very good training institutions and skilled workers are employed in South Korea, Germany and many other countries. In Iraq there are many foreign companies, where they will be happy to employ skilled workers from Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, when we talk about employment it is not only skilled workers but also professionals that we are seeking. And, also for both the private sector and government sector. Especially in the health sector we need nurses as well as anaesthesiologists. I want to stress to the Ministry of Health in Iraq to employ medical staff from Sri Lanka as they are well-trained.

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What are the developing industries in Iraq?
Iraq is a very good place for investment at all levels. We have investment

opportunities below the ground and above the ground. We want to develop oil-related industries, water and sanitation including sewage management and of course the construction industry. Currently Iraq needs approximately three million housing units for poor families as soon as possible. There are many Sri Lankan companies that have very high standards in the construction sector and are good in building housing units in mass scale. We want to develop various types of industries.

Government investment and private investment go hand-in-hand. There cannot be one without the other. Therefore in Iraq both sectors are contributing to development. Sri Lankan companies can visit the websites of all the ministries in Iraq. Information relating to tenders will be posted on these websites. There are many opportunities for Sri Lankan businesses to get involved in. However, in Iraq we do not allow Israeli companies or those with Isreali connections as well as black listed companies in the country.

Any company can study the market in Iraq and select which investment they would like to make in the country.

Through this MoU, there are rules and regulations to ensure the safety of Sri Lankan employees in Iraq. The Agreement is between the two Governments of Sri Lanka and Iraq. And as such the workers will come through the two Governments.

For example, if a project of constructing 100,000 housing units in Iraq is done by a Korean company, the employes can be from Sri Lanka. But, if a Sri Lankan company is investing it will be a success because the workers are from Sri Lanka and they will get the best price as well.

How will a Sri Lankan worker benefit by coming to Iraq?
It is an agreement between the company and the worker, but through this MoU, there are rules and regulations to ensure the safety of Sri Lankan employees in Iraq. The Agreement is between the two Governments of Sri Lanka and Iraq. And as such the workers will come through the two Governments.

For example when a particular company in Iraq needs workers they will make the request to our Ministry and we will in turn send the request to the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare through the Iraqi Embassy. Then the required workers will be sent to Iraq according to the provisions of the MoU.

The MoU that we signed is not just ink on paper. It is also to ensure the safety of the workers and that they are treated as human beings where there rights are upheld. No one can steal their rights. There have been instances where private companies have provided fake contracts or the employees are working on tourist visas. These companies lie to the workers. Therefore through this MoU everything is being done between the two Governments, not private companies.

How was your meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and what can you tell us about the relationship between the two countries?
Iraq and Sri Lanka had a very good relationship until ten years ago. These relationships need to be renewed and activated. The Sri Lankan President has visited Iraq in the 1970s and he loves Iraq and that is why he wanted to activate this relationship. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has welcomed us very well. He has been very nice and generous. Our Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sends his greetings to President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Our two countries have been through the same challenges of terrorism. There were bombs exploding in Sri Lanka where innocent people including children were killed and there was a similar situation in Iraq as well. Today, both countries are safe and have peace. Your President promised to make this country a peaceful country and he did what he promised. Our country is also peaceful but there are occasional explosions in the neighbouring areas of Iraq but that does not stop life. Projects, businesses and schools continue.

This is a very important MoU between the two countries since 2003. This MoU is going to strengthen the relationship between the two countries. And, also through your magazine I want to send my heartfelt greeting to President Mahinda Rajapaksa for his gracious hospitality. Minister of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, Dilan Perera has been very kind and helpful.

One important aspect that I would like to mention is that, Sri Lanka is a beautiful country where tourists like to visit. Tourists are like oil and if they are treated well they will continue to visit the country. Oil will end one day but tourists will not end. Therefore we would like to ask Sri Lanka to focus on its tourism sector.

I want to also extend my greetings to our Ambassador in Sri Lanka, Kahtan Taha Khalaf because he is doing a lot of work through the Embassy in activating the relationship between the two countries.





