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Migrants increasingly vulnerable due to global recession, says UN trade body



Zimbabwean migrants at a temporary shelter in South Africa

29 July 2009 – Surging global unemployment triggered by the economic crisis is significantly affecting migrant workers, many of whom have lost their livelihoods and are returning to their home countries, experts said at a United Nations trade arm meeting today.

With 60 million people expected to be out of work by year's end, bringing the total number of people pushed out of their jobs by the recession to 240 million, "the crisis will be impacting quite significantly on the flow of migrants," Supachai Panitchpakdi, Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (**UNCTAD**), said at the start of the one-day gathering in Geneva.

The economic downturn has hit construction, manufacturing and other sectors that employ many migrants, he said, adding that women migrants will feel the impact as jobs in health care, education and domestic services shrink.

Mr. Supachai underscored the "great need" for multilateral agreements, including through the World Trade Organization (**WTO**), to regulate migration and also harness its potential for development.

Global pacts can also ensure that knowledge and technology benefit the sending countries, as well as avoiding the negative effects of the so-called 'brain drain' on such nations, he noted.

Experts at the meeting said that actions taken at both the national and global levels could stem economic and personal losses of migrants as a result of the crisis, as well as using migration to jump-start economic recovery.

Sha Zukang, head of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (**DESA**),

pointed out that the number of migrants could reach 214 million by 2010, but that the recession has reversed the trend of the rising proportion of women in the migrant workforce.

Linking migration and development has a “win-win potential,” said Marielza Oliveira of the UN Institute for Training and Research (**UNITAR**), while cautioning that “enhanced dialogue and the sharing of ideas and practices” is vital, especially in times of turmoil.

Earlier this year, a UN-backed gathering found that the global financial crisis may have a dramatic impact on the lives of migrant workers in South-East Asia, noting in particular the negative repercussions for migrants’ health and their risks of contracting HIV/AIDS.

“As some countries may take increasingly protectionist stances, the options for formal migration will narrow rapidly,” according to a press release on the meeting published by the UN Development Programme (**UNDP**).