

Demographic Imbalance and Implications on National Security – A Management Challenge for India

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It is indeed a privilege for me to be invited to deliver a lecture at the United Service Institution of India, an Institution that has been in the forefront of work on studies relating to national security. The USI has been doing great service to the country in building a strategic culture that simply did not exist till recently. Preoccupied with electoral politics and short term agendas, those in charge of policy-making have neither time nor interest to think about the national security issues in long term. I was initially reluctant to accept the invitation, as I do not consider myself qualified to speak on this important subject. My only qualification to speak on the subject is that I was a victim of the mass migration in 1947 and a witness to the disastrous consequences of internal displacements and cross-border migrations for many years in the Northeast. To be giving the Major General Samir Sinha Memorial lecture adds honour to the occasion. Major General Sinha was not only associated with the USI since 1947, but was its Director for nine long years, from 1987 to 1996. It is appropriate that lectures on subjects of importance for national security are held in his memory. My personal association with Major General Sinha started when I became a member of the USI during his tenure as the Director.

The problem of demographic changes and the growing imbalance have serious implications for national security. If the complex issues being thrown up by this imbalance are not addressed adequately, they could threaten the very survival of the Indian Union as a sovereign republic. Successive governments are guilty of inadequate response to this very serious problem.

Military is only one aspect of the complex problem of national security. The military can do little except contain the problem for a brief period, until other aspects of the problem – political, social and economic – are adequately addressed. Demographic imbalance

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has, both, short term and long-term implications for national security. India is poised to emerge as a world political and economic power, but that hope would remain a dream unless we are serious in tackling this problem instead of treating it as a hostage to electoral politics. The 2001 census is an important source of information to learn about the serious imbalance in social and economic conditions that is developing in different parts of the country. I quote only a few facts to underline the point. The Indian population on 1 March 2001 was 1027 million. In ten years, the population increased by 181 million – an increase of 21.3 per cent though a slight decline in the increase as compared to 23.9 per cent in the previous decade. But more worrying is that Bihar, the third most populous state in the country, recorded the highest growth, which increased to 28.4 per cent as compared 23.4 per cent in the previous decade. Andhra Pradesh recorded the sharpest decline – 13.9 per cent from 24.2 per cent in the previous decade. UP, Maharashtra and Bihar in that order are the most populated states in India. West Bengal has the highest density of population followed by Bihar. The literacy rate was the highest in Kerala (90.9 per cent) and lowest in Bihar (47.5 per cent).

The 2001 census data fully confirms the common perception that BIMARU states (Bihar, MP, Rajasthan and UP) are the core of the population problems in India. Paradoxically, however, from the point of literacy level, Andhra Pradesh may be classified as a BIMARU state in South India. Other telling statistics are that nine states have a population of over 50 million, 10 states (including a Union Territory) over 10 million, and 16 states (including six Union Territories) less than 10 million. Sikkim has a population of only 0.54 million and Mizoram only 0.89 million. Union Territory of Delhi has the highest density of population and Arunachal Pradesh the lowest. Among the states, Bihar registered the highest increase, followed by UP and West Bengal. Assam and Nagaland are in the middle, and Manipur and Sikkim are among the lowest. All the southern states are demographically progressive and the 2001 census data confirms the analysis in terms of North-South demographic divide.

The demographic imbalance among various states creates problems, more so in a democracy. Democracy is a number game, where the winner takes all. It is the numbers that decide who

controls the levers of power. The problem gets more complicated when the distortions in the relative strength of various ethnic groups are due to internal displacements in the country or external migrations from neighbouring countries.

The history of movement of people from one place to another is as old as the history of mankind. But earlier there were rarely any protests against the immigrants. The problem of refugees, migrants, stateless and displaced persons, which one hears so often today, was unheard till not too long ago. The problem of the integration of migrants into the host societies started only when ethnic diversities became sharp, and the modern development processes made their social assimilation more difficult. In developing countries like India, there is intense competition between various ethnic and religious groups for the fruit of development. It is in this context that one has to understand the conflict of interest between the local inhabitants and the so-called 'aliens'. The aliens become easy scapegoats for the economic hardship of the local people. During the last half-century, the South Asian countries have witnessed the largest movement of people in recorded human history, both within the national boundaries as well as across them. Within India while the process of development caused large scale migrations from rural to urban areas, the regional disparities have resulted in movement of people from the impoverished to prosperous regions. Migrations from labour surplus regions, particularly during the plantation and harvesting seasons, are quite common. Large-scale migration of labour has been taking place from states like Bihar and Jharkhand to Punjab and even West Bengal in recent years. Another factor contributing to migrations is violence and terrorism against the minority community. The migration of large number of Hindus from Punjab in the eighties and the Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley in Jammu and Kashmir in the early nineties are examples of recent migrations.

In respect of cross-border migrations, the dimensions of the problem have been even larger. Ever since the partition of the country, according to some estimates, about 35 million people have been involved in cross-border movement in search of security of life, honour and property, and sometimes to escape from religious prosecution and other forms of discrimination. War and civil strife are other factors that have resulted in large-scale migrations. Economic hardships, a desire for ethnic, racial, ideological and

religious homogeneity have also driven people to leave their homes and migrate to the neighbouring countries.

The unleashing of 'jihadi' forces and international terrorism, to which are connected the drugs and arms and ammunition trafficking, have further complicated the issue. Together, the resultant movements of people have serious security implications. The security threat from these migrations has seriously undermined the bilateral relations and inter-state cooperation among countries in South Asia. It is not possible to understand the dynamics of the relationship between these countries without understanding the nature of movements. They impact very strongly both on internal politics and foreign policy. Military threats are no doubt important and cannot be ignored, but equally important are non-military threats. The epicentres of threats could be in environmental, demographic, ecological, and economic domains. They get more serious and complicated when linked to internal displacements and external migrations. However, it is not possible to appreciate the seriousness of the situation without understanding the political dimension.

Political Dimension

Security is a complex construct. Threat to national security can be interpreted in many ways. It is an action or sequence of events that could threaten the quality of life for its citizens, or it could significantly narrow the range of policy choices available to the government. Illegal migration causes politicisation of the issues leading to ethnic and religious conflicts in the host country with their natural fall-out on the bilateral relations. Drugs, guns and international terrorism coupled with growing corruption and criminalisation of politics convert this already volatile mix into a dangerous brew, which seriously impacts on India's national security. Many of the security problems that are viewed as political problems have demographic roots. Converse is also true. Policy interventions that are proposed and implemented with the intention of dealing with the demographic problem often result in distinctly political consequences. The centrality of India, both in terms of geography and political development, in South Asia, further underlines the importance of demographic factor for India's national security. The paradox, however, is that while political rhetoric concerning immigrants and refugees has increased, political will to take practical measures to check infiltration of illegal immigrants

has in fact decreased. While all political parties in the fray in the current assembly elections in Assam are aware of the seriousness of the problem, few are making it an election issue. In fact, it is the other way around. The Congress Party by amending the Foreigner's Act through an ordinance just before the assembly elections wanted to send a message to the illegal migrants, many of whom now play a crucial role in the outcome of the elections, that they have nothing to fear even if the IMDT Act has been held *ultra vires* by the Supreme Court. The Union Government has brought back the Act through the back door by amending the Foreigner's Act only for Assam for gaining political advantage in the electoral battle. The politics for power at any cost has destroyed the ideological base of most political parties. Blatant opportunism is increasingly robbing the politics in the country of legitimacy.

There is continuing dynamic and intricate relationship between the issues pertaining to population on the one hand, and to those pertaining to society and politics on the other. The demographics have not generally paid much attention to these interactions. It has been confirmed, both theoretically and empirically, that the demographic characteristics of a society invariably influence the politics of that society. Therefore, not surprisingly, politicisation of the demographic issues occurs not only in India but also all over the world. Demographic variations as a factor influencing internal politics, however, could be of various types. They range from internal migrations, increased birth rate, or reduced mortality rate, cross-border migrations, or the dismemberment of a country.

The close connection between population growths and migrations is well established. As early as in 1798, Malthus in his celebrated 'Essay on Population' dwelt extensively on the growth of population in England. But even demographers are not unanimous in their approach to managing the various issues. The economic demographers and political demographers have opposite points of view about the causes of migrations. The economists argue that in the sending country as compared to the receiving country the wages are low, employment opportunities fewer, and agricultural land use poor. Therefore, the so-called push factor is in operation resulting in out-migration from the sending country. In contrast, however, the political scientists emphasise the disequilibria within the sending country itself and not between the sending and the receiving country. Since there are regional and other sorts of

disparities within the sending countries, the disadvantaged people migrate to other countries to escape from their miseries, and eventually contribute to the disequilibria in the receiving country as well. While the migrants leave their country in search of better wages, prospective employers in the receiving country welcome them for the cheaper services they provide as compared to the native workers. The opposition to the Bangladeshi migrant is on account of political factors. While some political parties turn a blind eye to their presence, the others oppose their presence also in terms of electoral politics when they are projected as racial, communal or ethnic threat.

There is another interesting feature of these migrations. Empirical evidence from our neighbouring countries suggest where migrations are politically determined, they often diminish the ethnic heterogeneity of the country of origin, whereas economic hardship driven migrations have made the countries of destination more heterogeneous. The phenomenon of cross-border movements together with the inter-state conflicts they generate are increasingly becoming a major concern all over the world. Since the phenomenon is closely linked to the principles of self-determination, national integration and the politics of nation building, its nature and dimensions often become extremely complicated. The complexity of the issues involved is evident from the dissimilar stand taken by states with regard to such questions as ethnic loyalties, secessionist movements and so on, both within and outside their respective national boundaries,

Population pressures can lead to conflicts in a number of ways: first, because of population pressure on resources, that may be already scarce, leading to expansionist tendencies; second, when the clandestine population movement affects the demographic balance of the host region to the detriment of the interest of the local political elite, the latter are forced to enter into a relationship with the country of origin of the migrants. Of all kinds of factors impinging upon politics, however, the most complex are the ones having religious and ethno-nationalistic roots. The inter-state conflicts rooted in ethnic and religious discords are the most intractable and most violence-prone of all the issues relating to international conflicts, because they draw their sustenance from human emotions, which can often be irrational. Most of the migrations from the neighbouring countries have ethno-nationalistic and religious roots.

In the neighbouring Bhutan the majority Drukpas has forced a large number of ethnic Nepalese Lhotsampas to leave the country and seek refuge in India and Nepal. This influx into India was largely responsible for the launch of the anti-foreigner movement in the receiving areas in Assam. In Myanmar, that was part of British India till not long ago, about 900,000 Indians had to leave after it gained independence in 1948. Making Burmese the official language was the first strong signal that Indians were no longer welcome in Myanmar. A number of inter-ethnic conflicts owe their origin to demographic factors. Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka is one the many examples where demographic-factors had serious consequences for national security of the country. Here, like in Myanmar, the first signal was the declaration of Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka, thus, hurting the interests of a large number of Tamils. The Tamils who came to Sri Lanka centuries ago were made to feel alien in their own country. But unlike in Myanmar, they could not be pushed out of the country, as they decided to assert their autonomy in areas where they were in majority.

Assam and the Northeast

The problem has assumed serious proportions in Assam and other states in the Northeast. Population in Assam has increased from 10.837 millions to 26.656 millions in 2001. The decadal growth of Muslims increased from 34.5 per cent in the previous decade to 36 per cent in 2001. Migration-security interface has close connection with population growth. The demographic changes in Assam as a result of external and internal migrations have brought with them religious, ethnic and linguistic conflicts. Some of these migrations date back to the nineteenth century, when the then colonial government decided to bring in labour from Nepal and tribals from Bihar to meet the demand for labour in the tea-plantations in Bengal and Assam. So great was the pressure of the Nepalese in the region that Assam Rifles came to be manned mostly by the Gurkhas. Santhals came as indentured labourers. They are treated as aliens, especially in the Bodo dominated areas, even after about two hundred years. Marginalised and getting increasingly disenfranchised, their living conditions are pathetic. They are frequent victims of mass violence for ethnic cleansing. Assam is a classic case of political and economic destabilisation due to demographic factors. Because of its geographical location and its rich natural resources, Assam has been attracting migrants for

centuries. But the problems have become more acute since the partition of the country in 1947. Instead of finding a mutually acceptable solution to the problem, successive Bangladesh governments deny even the presence of the illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India. Internal politics in Assam have not helped the situation. Senior politicians, increasingly depending on the minority vote bank to secure power, have been giving protection to illegal immigrants. To what extent some political leaders have gone to cultivate the immigrant vote bank can be seen from their statements like that of Hitesh Saikia, the former Chief Minister of Assam, who emphatically claimed in 1991, that if anybody could identify a single foreigner in Assam, he was willing to quit politics forever. The insincere rhetoric was aimed at attracting the Muslim vote bank. It ignited communal passions in Assam. The Illegal Migrant Determination Tribunals (IMDT) Act was passed in 1985 to assure the minority vote bank and to neutralise the Foreigner's Act, which puts the onus of proving that he or she is an Indian citizen on the person concerned, whereas under the IMDT Act the onus is on the authorities to prove that the person is not an Indian citizen. Politics continue to play a role, and the fact the UPA government amended the Foreigner's Act through an Ordinance for Assam only to put the onus on the authorities to prove the illegal status of a person days before the forthcoming assembly elections in Assam, only shows that political interests continue to be given preference over national security interests. In order to strengthen their political base, different political parties have been manipulating differently the question of infiltration of the Bangladeshi nationals into India.

The result is the continuing inflow of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh into Assam that is creating all sorts of political and security problems in the state.

Assam is not the only state in the Northeast faced with this serious problem. Arunachal Pradesh has still to sort out the problem of the Chakmas. In Mizoram too, the presence of Chakmas from Bangladesh has become a major political issue. Both the ruling and the opposition parties vie with each other to score political points against each other on the Chakmas issue. Flow of refugees and economic migrants from Bangladesh has made Tripura a Bengali majority state, leaving its indigenous tribes feeling marginalised. The division of Assam to accommodate the demand of some major tribes has led to unending demands for the creation of more states

on ethnic lines. The Bodos who number about two million, that is double the number of Nagas, want a separate state. The Kukis demand a separate state in Manipur. The Nagas want Greater Nagaland to encompass all the Naga dominated areas. The tragedy is that ethnic cleansing through violence has over the years become part of the strategy to press the demand for a separate state. The division of Assam and the creation of new tribal dominated states have not solved the problem. In fact, it has led to the creation of many more serious conflicts in the region. The shortsighted strategy was like opening of the proverbial Pandora's box. The dominant tribes who had earlier agitated against the so-called Assamese domination, now seek to extend similar domination over the smaller tribes. Even in a tiny state like Mizoram, which is frequently quoted as a land of peace, is now confronted with demands for the creation of more states and autonomous districts from smaller tribes like Riangs, Brus, Lakhers, Hmars and the Chakmas, whom the Mizo now regard as outsiders. Some of these tribes like Hmars, Brus and Riangs have taken to arms to press their demands. Tribal and racial groups demanding the creation of homelands for their group have unleashed a campaign of terror to push out all the so-called 'outsiders'. A violent stalemate has been created and the situation is likely to get only worse.

External Security

The security connection has internal as well as external dimensions, both causational and consequential linkages. The external dimensions are even more serious than the internal dimensions. Out of the 28 states that constitute the Indian Union 17 have international borders. In the Northeast, 98 per cent of the border is international border. During the colonial period, the British policy in the peripheral areas was dictated by the requirements of security from external threats. The division of the country, especially the division of Bengal and the creation of East Pakistan is responsible for the many cross-border migrations. It is directly responsible for the huge inflow of migrants from East Pakistan (Bangladesh). The issue of illegal migrants is one of the major issues responsible for the tension in bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Many senior Bangladeshi political leaders have openly talked about India's Northeast to provide living space to ease its population pressure. Moreover, India-locked Bangladesh feels threatened by India's size and its military and economic power.

Ever since its creation in 1971, successive governments have continued the Pakistan policy of supporting subversive and secessionist forces in the Northeast. One cannot deny the ground reality that anti-India sentiments today are no less strong in Bangladesh than in Pakistan. The growing Talibanisation of Bangladesh is a matter of great concern. Its collaboration with the ISI for spreading subversion in the Northeast and its support to the *Jehadi* forces, including Al-Qaeda, cannot be ignored. Bangladesh has undergone a big political and social transformation over the past three decades. Islamic nationalism has replaced Bengali nationalism, architect ideology of the creation of Bangladesh. This process that started with Sheikh Mujib has been gathering momentum. Harkat ul Jihad Islami (HUJI) was formed in 1992. An umbrella group called the Bangladesh Islamic Manch was set up in 2002. These developments have caused great sense of insecurity among the Hindus and have resulted in their exodus in large numbers to India. The capture of a ship with huge cache of arms on 2 April 2004 in Chittagong goes to show how Bangladesh has become a centre of *jehadi* terrorism and a market for export of arms and explosives to the insurgent groups in the Northeast. The demand of homeland for the Bengali Muslims in Assam and other parts of the Northeast is getting louder. When the Bangladesh Foreign Minister makes the remarks that if Bangladesh is India-locked, India's Northeast is Bangladesh locked, he is not being frivolous. If fact, he is being quite serious, as he is claiming parity with the bigger neighbour through this leverage. When the neighbouring country harbours a desire to separate the Northeast from India, to fight its sense of insecurity or for expansionist designs, the flow of illegal immigrants and the change in the demographic imbalance are matters of serious concern for India's national security. The Task Force on Internal Security in a report in 2002 noted with concern the spread of the ISI network in the Siliguri Corridor, an area that is so crucial for the security of the Northeast. Large-scale illegal immigration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of the states in West Bengal and the states in the Northeast. The many ethnic insurgencies flourishing in the Northeast have developed unprincipled networking of the *jehadi* forces. All these developments should have raised alarm bells in India. But unfortunately, the policy-makers have continued in a state of denial. It would be suicidal to ignore the rapid growth of Islamic

fundamentalism in our neighbourhood; but it also needs to be stated that it would be equally dangerous to twist the facts in such a way to give them a religious colour to play communal politics. Doing so would be doing what the *jehadi* forces have not succeeded in doing so far, that is, to radicalise the Indian Muslims and build a strong base of the *jehadi* forces in India.

Indo-Nepal relations are also greatly influenced by the presence of the Nepalese as also by people of Nepalese origin in India, and the presence of the people of Indian origin in Nepal, especially in the Tarai area. Indo-Sri Lanka relations are similarly influenced by the Sinhala-Tamil relations, and have given rise to the problem of the LTTE, which has its sympathisers and bases in south India. Migrations and ethnic factors have further complicated the relations between India and its neighbouring countries. The demographic factor plays a crucial role when viewed in this context.

A Management Challenge

In this highly complex situation, there are no easy solutions. Ideally, the most obvious solution lies in regional cooperation approach, where the countries take a broad regional view of the problems and manage the migrations in cooperation with each other. The concerned countries, big or small, should have a sense of participation in a regional security system. Such an approach, unfortunately, is not practicable unless the countries concerned have friendly and reasonable attitude towards each other. In the absence of a desire for mutual good, it is not possible to make any meaningful progress through this approach. But this does not mean that all diplomatic efforts should stop. While every possible diplomatic move should be made to persuade Bangladesh to change its attitude in its own interest, there is no alternative to taking other measures to manage the situation. A comprehensive strategy that simultaneously tackles the problem, both internally and externally, and takes into account the micro and macro-level management problems, has a chance of success.

Internally, steps will have to be taken to stop large-scale internal displacement from one part of the country to another. A well-planned development strategy to reduce regional disparities is a must. The growing gap between the so-called advanced states

and the poor and underdeveloped states needs to be bridged by sensible development policies. Assam and other states in the Northeast deserve special attention. In an extremely heterogeneous and ethnically sensitive society as in the Northeast, where the acceptance of even legitimate demands of one group is seen as an assault on the concerns of another, the demands for further divisions will grow. Peace and development are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. The solution is economic development backed by a legal and constitutional framework that is sensitive to local concerns, that gives economic equity and political fairness to all including the small ethnic groups. But there can be neither peace nor development without good governance. There is no reason why the quality of governance in these strategically sensitive areas cannot be improved. Requirements of both national security and development are, in fact, the same. The central government should stop treating the posting of senior administrative and police officers in these states as punishment postings. The postings in these areas should be treated as a challenge and only those who are willing and suitable should be posted. The present All India Services cadre system in the Northeast should be completely overhauled. A new Northeast Administrative Service should be constituted. The officers from this service should not be transferable to the Centre or any other state. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) should screen volunteers from all the Class One Services, including the Armed Forces, to fill the posts for the initial constitution of the new Service.

It must be recognised that there is no way the Indian government can forcibly send away the large number of illegal immigrants who are already here, if the Bangladesh government refuses to recognise them as their citizens and accept them into Bangladesh. In this situation, the only practical solution is to follow a strategy of strong physical and legal measures to ensure complete stoppage of any future inflow of illegal migrants, and to extend the government control over those who are already here. The suggestion of giving work permits based on length of their stay and suitability to those already here deserves serious consideration. The internal controls include raising legal barriers to their employment and making their stay in the host state more difficult. Anyone giving shelter or employment to the unregistered illegal immigrant should lose his or her work permit in addition to other legal punishments.

The question of migration is closely linked to national borders. Effective border security control is one of the key elements in meeting this management challenge. Borders throughout history have been a controversial subject and evoke strong emotions particularly from people and groups living near them. In a nation-state the concept of borders is considered sacrosanct. Borders are markers of a state system. The problem arises when territory, national identity and political community do not any more correspond with one another. National borders are political constructs, projection of territorial power. Border regions have their own social and economic dynamics. Revolutionaries hide there, local inhabitants cross them, whenever services and commodities are cheaper or of better quality on the other side. And the traders are quick to take advantage of price and tax differentials. The border security depends on a number of factors like cohesiveness of the state, the strategic and economic importance of the border, and more importantly the actual presence of the state in the borderland. Vested interests develop not only among some people living in the area, but also among the customs officers and the security officials serving in the area, who get involved in smuggling of humans and contraband articles. They facilitate smuggling which becomes more profitable than checking it. But before we think of soft borders as a solution, we must have an effective system of identity cards in place. None of India's international borders can be termed as friendly borders, not even the Indo-Nepal border. Crossing that does not require an Indian passport or visa. The recent political developments in Nepal and the growing clout of the Maoists in that country have serious repercussions for India's national security. India-Pakistan border is a hostile border and the rest come somewhere between these two extremes. For obvious reasons, the management of demographic imbalance and border management has to be approached differently on different borders. There is no common solution for all of them. The oft-repeated phrase, sealing of the borders, has little meaning when applied to most of the country's international borders. Either the terrain is such that the sealing of borders through physical measures is simply not possible, or the ground situation does not allow these measures to succeed for political reasons. Ultimately, the success of border management will depend on how easy or difficult it is for the illegal immigrant to cross into the country and find shelter and employment, and for the government to detect their

presence. It is not an easy task. Linkages of ethnic kinship have made the borders porous and difficult to secure. Moreover, ethnic, religious or linguistic affinities of communities have encouraged constant cross-border movements.

Measures like border fencing need to be implemented in sensitive areas that are used as common routes for illegal infiltration. Improved surveillance and effective river patrolling is essential. An efficient network of police and revenue intelligence needs to be built up. Officer in charge of the local police posts should be made responsible for the detection of illegal migrants. His annual assessment report should contain a separate column about his performance in this regard. The Police Station should have a separate register for recording information about illegal migrants, the routes through which they infiltrate the places of shelter and employment.

We live in a troubled neighbourhood. The region is economically backward, politically unstable and, more importantly, two of India's most populous neighbours are rapidly being dominated by the *jehadi* forces. The concentration of madrassas and mosques, set up with foreign funding, in the border areas where demographic composition has undergone a radical change cannot be ignored. The Task Force on Internal Security had noted with concern the spread of the ISI networks in the Siliguri Corridor. Political parties must appreciate the seriousness of the situation and stop playing partisan politics with it. No internal or external strategy can succeed in the absence of a broad political consensus among the political parties. India's not very friendly neighbours are aware of this weakness and ruthlessly exploit it to pursue their own national agenda of breaking-up India and subverting its political and security system. Poor governance by politicians pursuing populist policies and non-performing civil services have created an explosive situation. Migrations cannot be totally stopped, but they can be drastically reduced if both the pull and push factors are managed in an imaginative way, and all political parties broadly agree to take a united stand against illegal migrations.