

## **The new slave trade: A poor country's best workers**

By NEIL REYNOLDS

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OTTAWA -- It's dramatic, this real-life parable from The New York Times. It illuminates a global brain-gain competition in which the United States is a winner nation, with more high-skill immigrants in absolute numbers than any other country. Canada is a winner nation, too, with more high-skill immigrants (in relative numbers) than any other country. In this particular story, though, Britain is the winner nation and Malawi, a country of desolation, the loser.

Malawi has a dire shortage of medical personnel in a part of the world without highly skilled, highly educated workers to spare. The Times reports: "The result of the nursing crisis is starkly apparent here on the dilapidated wards of Lilongwe Central Hospital, where a single nurse often looks after 50 or more desperately ill people. What is equally visible is the boon to Britain, where Lilongwe Central's former nurses minister to the elderly in the carpeted lounges of nursing homes and to patients in the hushed private hospital rooms. It is the poor subsidizing the rich, since African governments paid to educate many of the health workers who are leaving. At Lilongwe Central, an 830-bed hospital, there are supposed to be 532 nurses. Only 183 are left. And only about 30 of those are registered nurses, the highly skilled cadre that is most sought abroad."

Queen's University economics professor John McHale, along with University of Texas co-author Devesh Kapur, cite this passage in their new book *Give Us Your Best and Your Brightest*, a work that examines the steep price paid by poor countries when rich countries poach their most educated, most competent, most intelligent people. Their very best and their very brightest.

"Potentially the most damaging impact," the authors say, "is that it robs the [poor] country of individuals who could lead key institutions like universities, hospitals and businesses, and who could be the staff for strong institutions that protect against corruption."

Prof. McHale and Prof. Kapur say the worst-hit countries are the small ones. Only 4 per cent of China's university-educated workers now live in the developed nations that belong to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The percentage is precisely the same for India. But the balance changes for the Caribbean countries. Taking all of them together, more than 40 per cent of the Caribbean's university-educated contingent now live in an OECD country. (For Jamaica, the percentage is 83.) For the countries of West Africa, the percentage is 27. And migration keeps rising. The UN estimates that there are now 175 million people living outside the land of their birth -- 50 million more than 10 years ago. The United States has 34.9 million of these migrants, 12.4 per cent of its population. On the Top 10 list, Canada is seventh, with 5.8 million, 18.9 per cent of the population. (In relative terms, Israel ranks No. 1, with 2.2 million immigrants, 37.5 per cent of its population.)

Although the authors conclude that the movement of people brings as many benefits as costs, they lament the "poverty trap" that it leaves behind. They compare the current situation in much of contemporary Africa with the "profound disruption" left behind by the slave trade. In that forced migration of the 17th and 18th centuries, as many as 28 million people were traded as though they were commodities; most were able-bodied and young. Now people are leaving Africa at a faster rate; many of them are educated and young. In 2001, 31.4 per cent of African immigrants held university degrees. In the populations they left behind, only 3.6 per cent have a university education.

In the end, Prof. McHale and Prof. Kapur say rich countries must compensate poor countries for the educated people they select and they suggest ways in which the rich countries could "share the spoils" of the brain drain. They insist, however, that rich countries have a moral obligation to train all the doctors and nurses they need from within their own populations. And they suggest, as well, that rich countries issue more temporary worker visas -- compelling more immigrants, sooner or later, to take their skill sets and go home. Immigration Minister Joe Volpe appeared to adopt precisely this approach in his current proposal to increase Canada's acquisition of immigrants by 20 per cent (to 300,00 a year) by 2010.

Prof. McHale (born in Ireland) and Prof. Kapur (born in India) are themselves examples of the remarkable benefits that flow from the free movement of peoples. They ask disturbing economic and moral questions. How do rich countries pay poor countries for their best people without risking at least a whiff of the slave trade? The transactions would appear to put different price tags on different people. Are we moving toward an auction? Who bids for this Third World doctor, this Third World nurse? Who will start the bidding? Some people argue that "remittances" -- the money that immigrants send home -- compensate the poor countries. However, immigrants in some countries (Canada among them) appear to send home relatively little money.

The choices are stark. It seems we will either suck all of the human capital out of the poor countries, leaving them forever destitute, or pay for this precious finite resource in cash -- no reserve bid required.