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Press Statement

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JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN THE GULF: JCTR'S POSITION

Since the Government announced its plans to facilitate the recruitment of 1,000 Zambians to work in Kuwait, Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) there has been an on-going debate on the merits and demerits of this position. Finance Minister Margaret Mwanakatwe has explained that sending of over 1,000 youths to the Gulf region to work as maids, drivers, waiters and waitresses is part of the PF government's job creation strategy and that the Government is now delivering.

Some analysts have suggested that the offer of jobs from the Gulf appears relatively lucrative as workers are expected to receive up to K13,000 a month, 14 times the stipulated minimum wage for maids in Zambia.

While commending the Government for its efforts to create job opportunities abroad, Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) would like to urge the Government to take into consideration a number of pertinent factors when pursuing an option of promoting worker migration as a way of addressing rising unemployment. Apart from being preoccupied with financial and economic benefits that come with migrant remittances, the Government must also take seriously the need to take necessary measures to protect human rights and human dignity of its citizens working locally and abroad.

With regards to jobs, the Government has two cardinal obligations. Firstly, the Government has an obligation to create job opportunities for its citizens and to provide them a means of earning income and an honest living through employment. The importance of employment cannot be overemphasized, because it is through work that people realize their potential and attain a meaningful human existence. According to the Catholic Social Teaching, "work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected - the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative."

Secondly, the Government has an obligation to ensure that its citizens working locally and abroad work in an environment that protects human rights and promotes human dignity. It is the Government's responsibility to protect its citizens from ending up in jobs that subject them to some subhuman conditions and abuse. The Finance Minister, Hon Mwanakatwe argues that these workers going to work in the Gulf region under the government program are ensured of security as government departments such as the Immigration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would be monitoring them in their country of posting. We all know that this is easily said than done.

Applying a well-known adage which states that prevention is better than cure, it will be prudent on the part of the Government to abandon this project of sending its citizens to the Gulf region. Instead the Government must find job opportunities for its citizens only in countries that have progressive labour laws and practices and that have a track record of promoting decent work and workers' rights. There are credible reports that migrant workers working as maids, drivers, waiters and waitresses in the Gulf region are subjected to various forms of abuses, including unpaid wages, confinement to houses,

abnormal working hours, physical or sexual assault by employers with some women being raped in some cases. The Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the BBC have separately reported abuse of migrant workers in the Gulf region doing the types of jobs that have been advertised in the Zambian media.

Worker migration does not fully address high unemployment in Zambia. The Government has a primary responsibility to create decent jobs in Zambia and its job creation strategies must be seen to deliver unequivocally on this. Sending people to work abroad must be considered only as ancillary to job creation drive at home. When it comes to exporting labour abroad, the Government must only promote migration of skilled and qualified workers. Zambia's economy will derive more economic benefits through skill, knowledge and technology transfer when these skilled and qualified citizens return home while still in their productive years. The Government must deliberately prioritize and adequately allocate resources to skills development in order to create a pool of skilled and qualified Zambians.