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UAE grapples with problems of reliance on expatriates

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UAE citizens are rapidly becoming a shrinking minority in their own country. UAE officials and businessmen say they are alarmed by what they see as a growing reliance on foreign workers who now form more than 90 per cent of the country's three-million workforce.

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UAE citizens are rapidly becoming a shrinking minority in their own country. UAE officials and businessmen say they are alarmed by what they see as a growing reliance on foreign workers who now form more than 90 per cent of the country's three-million workforce.

This is by far the highest percentage in the Gulf Arab states.

The UAE's rapid transformation from small tribal societies into a modern state with eight-lane highways and gleaming skyscrapers came at a heavy cost in a country where citizens have traditionally shied away from menial jobs.

"We are living in danger. Our nation is in danger because most of the important activities are in the hands of foreigners," said businessman Juma'a Balhoul. Balhoul was one of a dozen UAE officials, academics and businessmen invited by the leading Arabic-language Al-Khaleej newspaper this month to debate what many see as a threat to the local population by an influx of foreign workers.

Foreigners now virtually dominate the private sector and form around 60 per cent of the public sector workforce, delegates said.

According to the latest official census in 1997, the UAE population stood at 2.7 million, more than 75 per cent of it foreign.

UAE officials privately say the figure was now around four million, 85 per cent of them foreigners, mainly from India, Pakistan and other South-East Asian countries. The expatriates-to-locals ratio is higher in the workforce as UAE immigration laws ban low-paid labourers from bringing in their families.

In 1968, three years before the country's independence from Britain, UAE nationals represented 62 per cent of the workforce, said Matar Juma'a, head of the statistics unit at the Abu Dhabi government planning department.

"We are now less than 7.5 per cent," Juma'a added. The UAE does not issue a detailed breakdown of its population.

Delegates said they feared a new wave of unskilled labourers as the Gulf's regional trade and tourism centre embarks on big projects to transform the country into an information and technology hub. "Who is going to fill all these buildings and skyscrapers. Do we really need all these projects?" asked Balhoul.

"We are facing a grave issue that demands a swift solution. We are shackled and I want a solution now before I become a mere one per cent," said Mohammed Mazroui, secretary-general of the Federal National Council. Mazroui said a lack of laws setting limits on the country's need for foreign labour was also to blame for the situation.

A study of the workforce in the private sector released last month found that construction and services employed the majority of the UAE's 1.4 million workers, two-thirds of whom do not have a secondary education.

Many of them have stayed illegally after the completion of projects, working in farms, at petrol stations and as servants.

Delegates said the flood of foreign labour was wiping out the Arab character of the country where some areas now resembled parts of India or Pakistan.

"You can see the true composition of the UAE society at any site. At every street, you can count only two nationals against 100 foreigners," Balhoul said.

"They say that prevention is the best cure, but we're beyond the phase of prevention and cure. We've reached the amputation stage to prevent this cancer from spreading," added Balhoul, who is also a medical doctor.

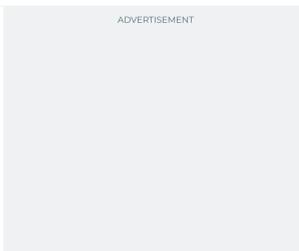
Aware of the demographic imbalance, the UAE authorities are already enforcing curbs on unskilled workers and thousands of illegal immigrants have been deported in recent months.

Officials and Asian diplomats say many had been victims of swindlers in their own countries and their agents in the UAE - some paying up to \$2,000 for a visa. "This desired transformation into less reliance on foreign workers is long and costly," cautioned Ahmed Khalil Al Mutawa, a U.S.-trained economist. "It is easy in some sectors, such as industry and agriculture where you can employ modern technologies, but difficult in retail trading and services."

Delegates urged the federal government to stop projects that duplicated others and focus instead on technology-driven industries.

The study on the private sector found that some 170 factories employed a total of 136,000 workers. "What we want are nine or 10 big factories that employ no more than 5,000 workers that could have the same productivity. But the question is who is going to take such a decision?" asked one delegate.

Aboubakr Badawi, Gulf regional representative of the International Labour Organisation, said labour-intensive programmes favoured by countries suffering from unemployment could not work in the Gulf. "In this region, you have abundance of wealth and scarcity of inhabitants," Badawi told Reuters by telephone from Kuwait. "What the Gulf countries need are technology-intensive programmes to boost productivity," he said.



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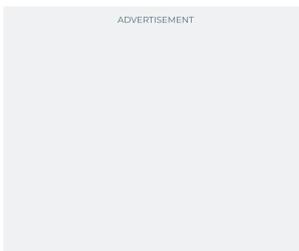
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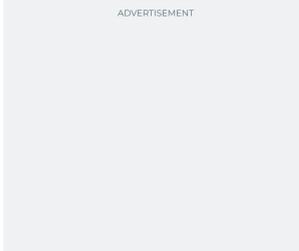
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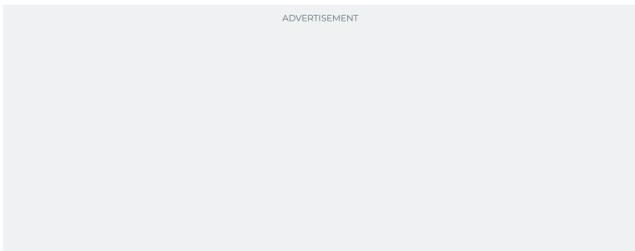
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