

**Tokyo Democracy Forum 2021**  
**UN Sustainable Development Goals 16+ Monitoring Report**  
**Migrant Workers in Asia: Responses of national and local**  
**actors during COVID-19**

Eswari Krishnadas, CS Akhil (Migrant Forum in Asia)

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# 1 IMPACT OF COVID19 ON LABOUR MIGRATION

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Covid19 is no more a health crisis. It threatens the health, livelihood and income of workers and employers globally. The increasing impact of the virus in major destination countries such as Italy and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the limited mobility through air and the impact on economy and employment affects the international migrant workers to a great extent. Almost all countries have implemented border closures, travel restrictions, prohibitions on arrivals from certain areas, and heightened screening. Moreover, the crisis has already transformed into an economic and labour market shock, impacting not only supply (production of goods and services) but also demand (consumption and investment). All businesses, regardless of size, are facing serious challenges, especially those in the aviation, tourism and hospitality industries where most of the migrants are employed. The services sector, tourism, travel and retail are especially vulnerable. An initial assessment by the World Trade and Tourism Council forecasts a decline in international arrivals of up to 25 per cent in 2020, which would place millions of jobs at risk.

This has affected millions of migrants working or studying abroad stranded away from home, with unequal or uncertain access to health care and other critical services. Migrants have long been scapegoated for public health concerns of the day. They are still being blamed for lack of available medical facilities in major destination country like Italy where Covid19 hit the hardest. The major epidemics affected the world in the 21st century such as Zika virus (2016), Ebola fever (2014), and H1N1 influenza (2009) never had any impact on important destination countries. However, migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, which will constrain both their ability to access their places of work in destination countries and return to their families particularly informal and casually employed workers. Temporary visa holders in all major destination countries have no certainty about their stay. Their access to key public services such as health care is often limited.

Unprotected workers, including self-employed, casual and gig workers, are likely to be disproportionately hit by the virus as they do not have access to paid or sick leave mechanisms and they are not protected by other support systems by the government. Due to the fear of getting caught, undocumented workers do not access health facilities as well. Absence of firewalls in healthcare access for undocumented workers make them most vulnerable. Among undocumented workers, women domestic workers are the most vulnerable due to restrictions upon their freedom of movement, access to health and grievance redressal as well as lack of gender-based protections.

Even though the nature and characteristics of labour migration differ in each regional migration corridor, the impact of COVID-19 was similar among migrants and other stakeholders. Job loss, lack of access to health services, absence of quarantine facilities and process of repatriation were the major concerns related to labour migration in the initial months of pandemic. Stakeholders in major regional migration corridors (such as Europe to Europe, Caribbean and Latin America to North America, South Asia and South East Asia to West Asia and North Africa as well as migratory movements within the African continent) have been affected disproportionately by the pandemic and a reduction in the migration flow is predicted by various global agencies in all these five major labour migration corridors<sup>1</sup>. The World Bank in its latest publication<sup>2</sup> predicted a steep fall in the remittance in the last

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-78-achieving-the-sdgs-through-the-covid-19-response-and-recovery/>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33634#:~:text=The%20economic%20crisis%20induced%20by,when>

quarter of 2020 and a reduction in the labour movement from origin countries to major host countries at least until the first half of 2021.

Among the regional corridors, the labour migratory movements from South Asia and South East Asia to west Asia and the labour movements within Asia had witnessed various policy interventions, especially the large-scale repatriation of migrant workers during the pandemic compared to other regions. The temporariness of labour migration and the massive presence of low-skilled migrant workers make the corridor different from all other major labour migration corridors.

## **1.1 IMPACT OF COVID19 ON LABOUR MIGRATION IN ASIA**

Asia is highly diverse in terms of development, economy and forms of government. This diversity was very evident in the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A few governments were highly proactive and responded by quickly developing robust testing regimes, contact tracing and strict community quarantines. Other governments either responded too slowly, and ineffectively or reduced media coverage over fears of negative economic repercussions.<sup>2</sup>

China began to report cases from December 2019, and Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan and Thailand confirmed cases in January 2020. Initially, the low rate of increase and the low mortality rate did not create panic among the governments and people. The first death outside China happened in the Philippines and the first reported human to human transmission happened in Malaysia in the first week of February. These were key events which initiated policy responses from governments in the form of screening at the ports and large-scale testing. By end of February, most countries in the continent had reported at least a single case of COVID-19. But none of them except China had adopted lockdown measures to contain the spread. During this period, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan were commended for containing the virus through effective testing and monitoring measures. The Italian decision to keep the most affected region of Lombardy under quarantine from March 8th along with China's success in containing the virus through lockdown policies in Wuhan, definitely influenced decision-making and subsequent policies of other countries.

After China and Italy, the Philippines was the next country to announce strict lockdown measures on March 17th and the second country in Asia to follow this strategy. The following day, the Malaysian government enforced the lockdown through Movement Confinement Order (MCO). These two policy decisions had widespread impact and South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh also subsequently announced nation-wide lockdowns. Simultaneously, Gulf countries and other South East Asian countries implemented lockdown in pockets where the virus spread was rampant.

Apart from the effects upon access to public health, the mitigation strategies in response to COVID-19 have had a number of socio-economic implications. The costs of adopting lockdown as a mitigation strategy is high and its implications are long-lasting. Macroeconomic effects, coupled with the impact on supply chain and logistics, livelihoods and food security as well as protection of human rights are the devastating indirect effects of the COVID-19 crisis. The sudden decision by many governments to close international borders prevented many migrant workers from travelling back home, specifically from March 17th to March 26th. The lack of access to health facilities, absence of proper quarantine

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[%20viewed%20through%20amigration%20lens.&text=Migrant%20remittances%20provide%20an%20economic,to%20muc h%E2%80%90needed%20health%20services.](#)

facilities along with the adverse effects of lockdowns made migrant workers one of the most vulnerable categories of people in Asia.

Most migrant workers in Asia are concentrated in sectors with high levels of temporary, informal or unprotected work, characterised by low wages and lack of social protection. ‘The unexpected lockdown and economic shocks led to insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages, cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increased restrictions on movements or forced returns (where returnees may be stigmatized as carriers of the virus)’.<sup>3</sup> Migrant workers in major destination countries (Middle East, South East and East Asian) found themselves undocumented due to sudden job losses or deliberate visa cancellations by their employers. Undocumented workers tend to be reluctant to apply for amnesty or access health and redressal facilities due to the fear of deportation and jail sentence. Migrant workers and refugees have suffered further due to the loss of immediate disposable income, reduced access to markets and inflated prices for goods.

Internal migrant workers, who move within national boundaries for work, especially in South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have been hit hardest by the lockdown strategies. Almost all of them work in the informal sector, living a hand-to-mouth existence, without any social or job protection. Lockdowns, and the consequent loss of jobs and daily wages, imposed a disproportionate burden upon them as well as low-skilled workers that earn below or just above the poverty line. Many continued to work despite the impending risk to their health or returned home, seen in mass reverse migration movements by internal migrant workers in these countries – coerced by the responsibility of ensuring their and their families’ livelihoods.<sup>4</sup>

The countries in the Asian region adopted two kinds of strategies from the second week of March. The first strategy was to mitigate the virus through lockdown and provide testing and quarantine facilities for the people. The second strategy was to develop policies to deal with the health and economic impact of the crisis. However, migrant workers fell outside the purview of these two policies. The repatriation of migrant workers and/or ensuring their well-being was completely ignored. Both home and host country governments delayed their response with Missions providing little help. Civil society observed clear lapses in Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) or crisis support system to assist migrants. Migrant workers globally, especially in Asia often lacked any access to welfare services and basic human rights.

The next section discusses the chronology of major events happened in the Asia region related to labour migration. It focuses on the important events in the major countries of origin and destination in Asia.

## 1.2 TABLE 1: CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Date	Event
<b>Jan – Feb 2020</b>	
23 January	First cases in UAE reported – a family of four from Wuhan. <sup>18</sup> First case reported in Nepal.
30 January	India, Philippines confirms first cases
3 February	Saudi Arabia remains free of coronavirus <sup>37</sup>
6 February	Coronavirus cases in UAE to be treated free of cost, insurance not necessary <sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms\\_743268.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-covid-19-paradox-in-south-asia/article31417806.ece>

8 February	Singapore reports first migrant worker infection <sup>70</sup>
24 February	Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Afghanistan confirm first cases <sup>54</sup>
28 February	UAE: New WHO guidelines issued for workplaces, business travel <sup>10</sup>
28 February	Saudi Arabia stops issuing visas to tourists from countries worst hit by coronavirus <sup>38</sup>
<b>March</b>	
1 March	KSA : Gatherings banned; travel restricted as coronavirus cases grow worldwide <sup>39</sup>
1 March	Saudi Arabia records first case <sup>45</sup>
8 March	Bangladesh confirms first case
9 March	UAE: Religious authority The Higher Committee of Human Fraternity warns against racial abuse <sup>14</sup>
13 March	India's decision to close all borders sparks panic among migrants
14 March	UAE temporarily suspends all visas as COVID-19 declared pandemic
15 March	Public places closed in major cities in Saudi Arabia <sup>45</sup>
18 March	UAE bans its citizens from traveling, bars entry to residency visa holders for two weeks, suspends work permit issuance <sup>11</sup>
18 March	Saudi Arabia suspends work in private sector except health, food and other vital services. <sup>45</sup>
23 March	UAE to suspend all passenger flights temporarily for 2 weeks <sup>13</sup>
23 March	Saudi, Kuwait impose evening curfews <sup>55</sup>
24 March	Nepal goes under lockdown for a week; International flights suspended till May 15 <sup>89</sup>
25 March	Dh45 million raised to support Abu Dhabi government in Covid-19 fight <sup>i</sup>
29 March	Saudi Arabia extends the suspension of all international and domestic passenger flights indefinitely. Private and public sector employees barred from going to their workplace. <sup>45</sup>
30 March	KSA: King Salman says patients diagnosed with coronavirus in the kingdom would get free healthcare. <sup>40</sup>
<b>April</b>	
2 April	Saudi Arabia tightens its coronavirus curfew to 24 hours a day in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. <sup>45</sup>
3 April	Saudi government to cover 60 per cent of salaries amid coronavirus <sup>41</sup>
4 April	Dubai imposes two-week lockdown as Gulf states step up coronavirus fight
8 April	Major Abu Dhabi food drive delivers vital support to hard-hit workers <sup>ii</sup>
11 April	UAE warns of action against countries refusing worker repatriation <sup>9</sup>
16 April	Kuwait announces general amnesty for undocumented works till April 30 <sup>8</sup>
16 April	'Qatar illegally expelled Nepali migrant workers during COVID-19 panic' <sup>80</sup>
22 April	Kuwait cases rise to 2248 with 13 deaths
26 April	Saudi government allows businesses to reopen and eases bans on movement to lessen economic toll <sup>42</sup>
29 April	Bangladesh Is Suppressing Free Speech During the COVID-19 Pandemic <sup>107</sup>
<b>May</b>	
1 May	Oman asks all state-owned firms to fire expat workers, intensify Omanization efforts <sup>7</sup>
3 May	More than 60,000 Pakistanis await repatriation <sup>15</sup>

3 May	Nepali workers in Malaysia fear COVID-19 crackdown <sup>122</sup>
5 May	Nepal government considers bringing back Nepali migrant workers from Covid-19-affected countries <sup>iii</sup>
7 May	India begins repatriation mission <sup>16</sup>
8 May	Kuwait imposes total curfew from May 10-30 <sup>56</sup>
12 May	India: Plea in SC seeks repatriation of migrant workers in detention camps from Kuwait
16 May	India to begin second phase of repatriation <sup>95</sup>
21 May	Bangladeshi workers at the centre of Singapore's Covid-19 resurgence <sup>69</sup>
29 May	Almost 160 Sri Lankans repatriated from Kuwait test positive for Covid-19 <sup>57</sup>
<b>June</b>	
3 June	UAE to resume transit flights as new cases announced <sup>19</sup>
4 June	Nepal: Migrant rights groups slam government plan to charge migrant workers for their repatriation <sup>84</sup>
5 June	Nepal: First batch of 169 migrants return from UAE <sup>85 82 81</sup>
9 June	Nepali workers in Kuwait still await return despite applying for amnesty <sup>83</sup>
11 June	Nepal: Airfare for international chartered repatriation flights capped as government lists new flying rules <sup>86</sup>
15 June	UAE to launch bonus scheme for Covid-19 frontline workers <sup>17</sup>
15 June	Saudi Arabia calls for compliance as cases rise <sup>43</sup>
17 June	Nepal: Supreme Court orders government to use welfare fund to repatriate Nepali workers stranded abroad <sup>85</sup>
17 June	Bangladeshi expats' death toll exceeds 1,000 <sup>108</sup>
22 June	Saudi Arabia reports 3,393 new Covid-19 cases <sup>44</sup>
<b>July</b>	
1 July	Indian residents of UAE charter private jets to reunite with family <sup>21</sup>
2 July	India: Kerala State government announces project to help expats who lost jobs due to COVID <sup>97</sup>
5 July	UAE orders government shake-up as coronavirus hits economy <sup>20</sup>
5 July	Kuwait approves expat quota bill <sup>58</sup>
6 July	Qatar coronavirus cases exceed 100,000; Kuwait tops 50,000
9 July	UAE and India approve 15-day mission to bring stranded residents home to Emirates <sup>22</sup>
11 July	Etihad resumes flights between Abu Dhabi and six Indian destinations <sup>23</sup>
17 July	Big business in Bangladesh: Selling fake coronavirus certificates <sup>110</sup>
25 July	Malaysia arrests Bangladeshi migrant who criticised government on TV <sup>109</sup>
26 July	India: More destinations added for phase 5 of Vande Bharat Mission starting from Aug 1: Civil Aviation Minister <sup>100</sup>
<b>August</b>	
1 August	Kuwait bans flights to coronavirus 'high risk' countries <sup>59</sup>
4 August	UAE confirms no Covid-19 deaths for a fourth day as 189 new cases are recorded <sup>24</sup>
12 August	Residents rush to book flights to UAE as approval process waived <sup>25</sup>
12 August	Bangladesh: 70pc returnees struggle to find employment: IOM <sup>106</sup>
14 August	Nepal: National Human Rights Commission comes down on government over migrant repatriation <sup>87</sup>

18 August	Hong Kong bans Air India's Vande Bharat mission due to COVID-19 related issues <sup>99</sup>
19 August	Bangladesh : 64,000 migrant workers return home due to Covid-19 pandemic <sup>111</sup>
31 August	India: International Flights Banned Till September 30; Vande Bharat Mission to Continue For Now <sup>101</sup>
<b>September</b>	
9 September	Nepal government announces loosening of lockdown measures
9 September	Bangladesh: number of migrant workers returning not 'alarming', says minister 114 <sup>114</sup>
11 September	Ethiopian women and children migrants detained in Saudi Arabia return home <sup>iv</sup>
12 September	Nepal: Undocumented migrant workers to get government support for return <sup>88</sup>
13 September	Nepal Immigration in Kalikasthan, Kathmandu, resumed operations. <sup>v</sup>
14 September	India: Centre Says It Has No Data on How Many Migrant Workers Died in the COVID-19 Lockdown
19 September	UAE reports 809 Covid-19 daily cases, 722 recoveries <sup>27</sup>
23 September	Nepal records a total of 66,631 cases and 428 deaths
24 September	Saudi Arabia bans flights from India amid surging coronavirus cases <sup>46</sup>
25 September	UAE resumes visit visas <sup>26</sup>
27 September	Air India ferries over 12 lakh people under Vande Bharat plan <sup>98</sup>
28 September	Tens of thousands of residents return as UAE eyes jobs recovery <sup>31</sup>
28 September	Kuwait domestic workers' salaries surge to Dh4,795 in black market <sup>61</sup>
28 September	Short deadline spells trouble for Saudi-bound Bangladeshi migrants <sup>113</sup>
29 September	UAE: Recruiters say many jobseekers willing to take 30 per cent pay cut <sup>30</sup>
29 September	UAE: More than 24,000 coronavirus offences recorded in two weeks <sup>28</sup>
29 September	Dubai testing centre workers gave out negative Covid results for cash, police say <sup>29</sup>
29 September	Saudi Arabia reports 539 new coronavirus cases, 27 deaths
29 September	Kuwait's COVID-19 tally hits 104,568 with 587 new cases <sup>60</sup>
29 September	Bangladesh reports 362,043 total cases and 5219 deaths.
<b>October</b>	
05 October	UAE resumes granting some work permits, entry permits for domestic workers <sup>32</sup>
08 October	EU Parliament condemns Saudi Arabia over treatment of Ethiopian migrants <sup>47</sup>
19 October	India: Hundreds of Indian workers demand unpaid wages from Saudi construction firm <sup>121</sup>
31 October	Bangladesh: 473 women migrant workers dead abroad since 2016, 175 in Saudi Arabia alone <sup>115</sup>
<b>November</b>	
02 November	50,000 overseas Filipinos repatriated from UAE
04 November	Saudi Arabia to remove key restrictions on migrant laborers <sup>49 48</sup>
08 November	Expat remittances from UAE, Saudi Arabia fall as return migration takes effect
11 November	Kuwait gives green light for return of domestic workers <sup>62</sup>
11 November	Sri Lankans repatriated through government measures
14 November	No renewal of work and residency permits for expats aged 60 in Kuwait <sup>6465</sup>
21 November	Pakistan: State Bank warns of forced repatriation of overseas Pakistani workers <sup>119</sup>
24 November	Malaysian MP calls for hate speech law after Reuters Rohingya report
25 November	UAE halts new visas to citizens of 13 states <sup>36</sup>

<b>December</b>	
02 December	Kuwait Ministry of Public Works sacks 80 expat employees <sup>66</sup>
08 December	Saudi Arabia: SR1,000 fine for overstaying exit visa <sup>50</sup>
18 December	Nepali and Malaysian human rights bodies extend cooperation to protect migrant workers <sup>92</sup>
19 December	Reintegration support still elusive for Bangladeshi migrants <sup>116</sup>
19 December	Nepali migrant workers continue to be overcharged for overseas jobs <sup>90</sup>
19 December	Nepal: Report reveals Returnee migrants prioritise tourism and agriculture <sup>91</sup>
20 December	NHRIs of Nepal, Philippines and Maldives issue joint statement as a call to protect migrant worker rights <sup>93</sup>
23 December	Saudi Arabia takes steps to improve workers' group accommodation <sup>52</sup>
23 December	India: MEA's minimum referral wage circular draws flak <sup>103</sup>
24 December	Anti-Myanmar hate speech flares in Thailand over spread of COVID <sup>73</sup>
29 December	Thailand offers work permits to undocumented migrants to curb COVID-19 <sup>72</sup>
<b>January 2021</b>	
01 January	8,143 expats deported from Kuwait in 2020 <sup>67</sup>
02 January	Nepal: Online renewal of labour permits starts <sup>94</sup>
04 January	Saudi Arabia agrees to end blockade on Qatar, opens airspace and land border <sup>53</sup>
09 January	India: RTI queries reveal hundreds of unresolved labour cases at Missions <sup>104</sup>
10 January	Kuwait Ministry of Education report – “54% of teachers stuck abroad are not needed” <sup>68</sup>
12 January	Malaysia: King declares COVID-19 state of emergency; PM says healthcare system at breaking point

Various stakeholders have responded to the crisis at various capacities. The stakeholders such as the governments at countries of origin and destinations, civil society, local governments, private actors and most importantly migrants in the region reacted differently. It becomes imperative to analyse actions through an international migration lens.

The report aims to analyse policy decisions and initiatives of state and non-state actors during the COVID-19 pandemic in prominent labour migration corridors in Asia. In particular, it considers the broad labour migration corridors of South Asia to the GCC region and South Asia to South East Asia. In keeping with the scope of the KMDF and TDF, it further includes countries whose national reports were considered such as East Asia and Central Asia. The analysis is based on the SDG16+ framework and further attempts to link the progress (or lack thereof) of particular SDGs as complementary to SDG 16 and 17 as well. The report largely explores the role of actors such as national and local governments, civil society and grassroot level workers in ensuring the basic human rights of migrant workers (as pertaining to the SDGs).

#### **Coverage:**

- South Asia – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka
- GCC region – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait;
- South East Asia – Singapore, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines
- East Asia – Japan and Mongolia
- Central Asia - Kazakhstan

The report is divided into three sections. First section discusses the responses from governments, CSOs and local governments. The second section analyses and compare the responses from the three stakeholders based on migrant rights and aspects of democracy. The last attempts to understand the responses based on various SDG targets and indicators related to migration.

### 2.1 GOVERNMENT ACTIONS IN COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION

#### 2.1.1 Countries of Destination in GCC

Within the GCC region, governments were focused upon limiting the spread of the disease as well as tackling the economic downturn they were facing. Due to the economic pressure and large-scale exodus of migrant workers, countries in the region began lifting restrictions by June. For instance, Qatar had one of the world's highest per capita rates of infection and the initial spread were restricted within the crowded migrant worker accommodations. Without imposing curfews, Qatar began a four-phase lifting of restrictions on June 15. Kuwait initiated a five-phase plan at the start of June to gradually lift coronavirus restrictions, including partially restarting commercial flights from August 1.<sup>5</sup>

Similar pressures also helped countries strengthen their labour market and economic diversification efforts. Countries such as Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and KSA made major labour governance changes. For instance, Qatar raised the national minimum wage to QAR 1000 (including migrant workers) and ended the requirement for migrant laborers to obtain permission to change jobs (without a No-Objection-Certificate). Workers would need to seek new employment before quitting and only notify the Ministry of Labour of the job transfer (unlike in the United Arab Emirates, which allows workers a month off for a job search). Bahrain also has the 'flexi-visa' system, which allows legal migrant workers to pay a fee to obtain a new visa that is not dependent on their employer, but due to the expense, migrant workers were unable to take advantage of this initiative during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

Certain labour market changes were also made to limit the predominance of migrant workers and to capitalize upon public rhetoric and sentiments regarding increasing unemployment among nationals. These include the expat quota bill in Kuwait and similar initiative in Oman which ordered all state-owned companies to fire all expat workers and replace them with Omani nationals.<sup>7</sup> Kuwait also initiated amnesty for undocumented workers in April. Under the scheme, overstay fees are waived, workers are offered free flights home, and transitory housing and food till their travel dates. In addition, workers are allowed to return to Kuwait for employment legally. The month-long scheme has been phased by nationality. While helpful for undocumented workers, it has also been observed as the government choosing to balance labour market and employer interests during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> In April, the UAE warned it would review labour ties with countries refusing to take back citizens, including those who lost their jobs or were put on leave, and said it was considering strict quotas for work visas issued to nationals of those states (without specifying which countries) – this was in response to countries of origin acting slowly to repatriation requests by migrant workers.<sup>9</sup>

##### 2.1.1.1 United Arab Emirates

UAE's first case of coronavirus was reported on 23 **January** – a family of four that returned from Wuhan. In January, UAE employers were reported to have welcomed new guidelines by the World

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/06/qatar-coronavirus-cases-exceed-100000-kuwait-tops-50000/?gb=true>

<sup>6</sup> <https://themedialine.org/people/gulf-states-undertake-labor-law-reforms/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/may/01/bad-news-for-nris-as-oman-asks-all-state-owned-firms-to-fire-expat-workers-2137684.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/nepalis-in-kuwait-apply-to-return-home/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-04-11/saudi-king-approves-extension-of-curfew-until-further-notice-spa>

Health Organisation (WHO) that called upon organisations everywhere to be pro-active and start adopting preventive measures. In a statement issued in January, WHO had urged employers across the world to adopt “low-cost measures” to help prevent the spread of infections and to protect customers, contractors and employees at the workplace.<sup>10</sup>

**In March**, the UAE had suspended all visas to all foreigners, with the exception of diplomatic passport holders (effective March 17). It further barred entry to valid resident visas holders for a renewable period of two weeks (March 19). The country suspended all work visa issuance and visas-on-arrival and imposed a mandatory 14-day quarantine, violations of which will be prosecuted. The only exemptions to the work visa suspension apply to Expo 2020 permit holders and intra-corporate transfers. The UAE government has also implemented a ban on its citizens traveling overseas.<sup>11</sup> On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, the UAE government urged all residents to stay in their homes unless "absolutely necessary". In Dubai, malls and shops closed, except for stores selling essential goods including supermarkets and pharmacies, which remained open.<sup>12</sup> By March 25<sup>th</sup>, Dubai airline carrier Emirates changed a decision to suspend all flights by allowing repatriation flights due to ‘requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travellers’ and continued to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations (which include United Kingdom, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, the United States and Canada).<sup>13</sup>

The government also made efforts to reach out to migrant communities through charity initiatives. For instance, the Abu Dhabi government organised the ‘Together We Are Good’ initiative, through the Authority of Social Contribution in cooperation with private sector and individuals, raising more than AED 45 million in the first 24 hours and offering medical aid, meals and access to hospitals. In another instance, the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, comprising of international religious leaders dedicated to mutual understanding and peace, condemned using the coronavirus as an excuse to incite racial discrimination and urged that citizens work together to not spread xenophobic, bigoted or hateful rhetoric (9 March)<sup>14</sup>.

**In April**, Dubai was placed under an overnight curfew (other Emirates, since March 26) but its Supreme Committee of Crisis and Disaster Management said the lockdown would be for 24 hours for two weeks. Dubai had previously sealed off the Al Ras area, which has a large migrant population. Meanwhile, the Pakistan government also scheduled 14 flights from the UAE between April 20 and April 28, according to details released by the country's ministry of foreign affairs. After Pakistan had closed its borders on March 21, a large proportion of the migrant community gathered outside the Pakistan embassy in Abu Dhabi and consulate in Dubai to register for repatriation.<sup>15</sup>

**In May**, India began the phased repatriation mission from May 7 to 13 with 64 flights that will bring back 15,000 citizens from 12 countries including UAE. Indian ambassador to the UAE Pavan Kapoor

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<sup>10</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/uae/health/coronavirus-new-guidelines-issued-for-workplaces-business-travel-1.70023627>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-uae-bans-citizens-from-traveling-mandates-14-day-quarantine-for-entrants.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/health/coronavirus-uae-passenger-flights-grounded-malls-to-close-and-stay-home-order-given-1.995954>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/coronavirus-uae-to-suspend-all-passenger-flights-state-media/article31139817.ece>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/coronavirus-religious-authority-warns-against-racial-abuse-1.990402>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/coronavirus-more-than-60-000-pakistanis-await-repatriation-1.1014320>

was reported by Khaleej Times to be drawing up a list of passengers on priority basis and that the first seats on the flight would go to those with the direst need to return. Almost 200,000 Indians registered with their country's missions in the UAE to return home amid the coronavirus pandemic and thousands of visit visa holders were also stranded in the country without jobs. <sup>16</sup>

**In June**, the UAE formed a bonus scheme for vital sector workers during emergencies such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. According to the country's state-run WAM news agency, the system includes means of distribution and a specific set of criteria for essential staff to be compensated for their work in times of crisis. The compensation will be available for workers employed by the UAE's Ministry of Health and Prevention. <sup>17 18</sup> In June, The UAE allowed transit flights to pass through its three international airports, as the country slowly began to lift restrictions and resume economic activities. <sup>19</sup>

**In July**, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced a broad government restructuring on Sunday for more "agile and swift" decision-making amid the coronavirus pandemic, merging government entities and appointing new economy and industry ministers. Additionally, the ministries of culture and youth were merged. The new ministry oversees the country's National Media Council that accredits all local and foreign journalists and oversees media outlets operating in the country. <sup>20</sup> Emirati citizens have numerous perks to cushion economic blows. The government already provides Emirati citizens with subsidised housing, free healthcare, free higher education and scholarships abroad, pension plans, as well as assistance in finding work and occasional debt relief.

However, migrant communities are not as lucky. In the initial phases of repatriation missions, migrant communities used their savings to pay for charter flights to and from the UAE to their countries since the closing of borders in March. Travellers split the cost between the group chartering the flight. Chartering a flight from India typically costs \$6,500 to \$9,000 (Dh23,874 to Dh33,057) per flying hour, depending on the aircraft type. <sup>21</sup> Eventually considering the high demand, Emirati and Indian governments agreed to operate special flights from July 12 to July 26. More than 450,000 Indians registered with the consulate in Dubai and embassy in Abu Dhabi and about 90,000 had returned home as of July. <sup>22 23</sup>

**In August**, the UAE confirmed 189 new coronavirus cases, with the total number of cases at 61,352. The nationwide death toll stands at 351. <sup>24</sup> During this month, The Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship (ICA) removed immigration procedures that required residents, who were abroad to apply

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/coronavirus-how-much-will-tickets-on-uae-India-repatriation-flights-cost->

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/448183-uae-to-launch-bonus-scheme-for-essential-frontline-workers>

<sup>18</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/uae/indian-expat-in-uae-found-infected-by-coronavirus-1.1581392108339?slide=9>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/health/coronavirus-uae-to-resume-transit-flights-as-new-cases-announced-1.1028579>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/07/05/uae-orders-government-shake-up-as-coronavirus-hits-economy/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/transport/coronavirus-indian-residents-of-uae-charter-private-jets-to-reunite-with-family-1.1041407>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/transport/coronavirus-uae-and-india-approve-15-day-mission-to-bring-stranded-residents-home-to-emirates-1.1046739>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/transport/coronavirus-etihad-resumes-flights-between-abu-dhabi-and-six-indian-destinations-1.1047624>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/health/coronavirus-uae-confirms-no-covid-19-deaths-for-a-fourth-day-as-189-new-cases-are-recorded-1.1058741>

for permission to return to the Emirates. Instead, residents had to update their personal data on an online portal and be tested for Covid-19 within 96 hours of travel. No approval was needed to book a flight back.<sup>25</sup> **In September**, the government were looking at easing restrictions and recovery of the economy, announcing it had resumed issuing entry permits, except for work, starting from September 24.<sup>26</sup> As of 19 September, UAE recorded an alarming increase in daily cases and the ministry reported that most cases were caused by gatherings resulting from family and social visits without compliance to precautionary measures. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi's tourism authority issued precautionary guidelines for spas at five-star hotels and desert camps.<sup>27</sup>

The government (National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority) further announced that offences with respect to public health and safety occurred, recording 24,894 offences between September 1 and September 15. The largest number of offences took place in Dubai, followed by Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. It was further mentioned that Asians topped the list with 81 per cent offences, followed by Arabs at 19 per cent. The most common offence was failing to wear a mask, followed by exceeding the number of people permitted to travel in a vehicle.<sup>28</sup> Coronavirus testing centres were also found to be providing fake negative results in exchange for cash, particularly for workers and commuters travelling between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where the rules of quarantine were different. The employees were referred to the Emergency and Crisis Prosecution at the Federal Public Prosecution.<sup>29</sup>

In terms of migrant labour, recruiters report a steady rise in vacancies in August and September with roles in finance, marketing, health care and education most in demand. A report from The National mentioned that recruitment companies expected the job market to improve in late 2020 and early 2021. In some sectors, it was mentioned that jobseekers looking for mid-level to senior positions were willing to take a salary cut up to 30 per cent to stay in the region. However, most employers looking for new staff have focused on hiring locally due to visa and travel restrictions. In other labour-intensive sectors, there has been a sharp decline in hiring over the past few months reflecting the impact of closed offices and reduced hospitality services across the country due to Covid-19.<sup>30</sup>

Repatriation services continued in September and it was reported by The National that more than 430,000 Indians have gone home since May, along with about 80,000 Pakistanis (the Pakistani Mission estimates half of the amount had lost their jobs), 40,000 Filipinos and 20,000 Bangladeshis. Not everyone who boarded planes home lost jobs, with many on expired visitor visas and others taking annual leave.<sup>31</sup> Repatriation efforts also saw different migrant communities being affected differently. Around 60,000 Indians returned to the UAE to resume work. For Filipinos, the restrictions upon the retail and hospitality industry affected a majority of those that returned. Confusion about the dates of visas extension and amnesty cover caused several to return instead of paying fines. Others have switched to visitor visas to stay in the country legally (as per the Consul-General of the Philippines in

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/coronavirus-residents-rush-to-book-flights-to-uae-as-approval-process-waived-1.1062835>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/government/covid-19-reunion-time-as-uae-resumes-visit-visas->

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/20200919/coronavirus-uae-reports-covid-19-cases-recoveries>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/more-than-24-000-coronavirus-offences-recorded-in-two-weeks-1.1085654>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/courts/dubai-testing-centre-workers-gave-out-negative-covid-results-for-cash-police-say-1.1085524>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-jobs-recruiters-say-many-jobseekers-willing-to-take-30-per-cent-pay-cut-1.1085401>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/coronavirus-tens-of-thousands-of-residents-return-as-uae-eyes-jobs-recovery-1.1084811>

Dubai). The Bangladeshi community also struggled and SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] owned by Bangladeshis were hit badly as well.

**By October**, the UAE government resumed granting work permits for non-nationals employed at government and semi-government entities as well as for domestic workers.<sup>32</sup> However, reports of migrants becoming homeless due to labour crises presented by the pandemic, persisted.<sup>33</sup> Repatriation efforts continued by countries of origin such as Bangladesh and the Philippines. Air Arabia offered to fly 44 Bangladeshi expatriates who left on their flight on August 14 but were sent back due to visa complexities. Besides, it will also operate a flight for the 68 expatriates who left for UAE in a Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight but were repatriated around that time for free.<sup>34</sup> As per the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, a total of 50,000 including their dependents have gone home. Of the 50,000, 2,600 have availed of the repatriation programme covering free airline tickets. Of the 50,000, a total of 926 had received their one-time \$200 (Php10,000/Dhs730) financial assistance from the AKAP (Abot Kamay Ang Pagtulong-Reaching Out) Programme of the Department of Labour and Employment (Manila).<sup>35</sup> **In November**, after normalising relations with Israel, United Arab Emirates (UAE) suspended issuance of new employment and visit visas temporarily to citizens of 13 countries, including Iran, Turkey, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Kenya, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and Tunisia – some of whom form significant migrant populations within the UAE.<sup>36</sup>

#### **2.1.1.2 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

**In January**, the Saudi Health Ministry reaffirmed that the Kingdom remained free of coronavirus and that authorities were taking all measures to prevent the spread of the virus. The health chiefs, meanwhile, declared 10 Saudi students flown home from Wuhan free from any infection.<sup>37</sup> **In February**, the Saudi Ministry of Tourism temporarily suspended issuing electronic tourist visas for those coming from China, Italy, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Kazakhstan. The ministry also decided to temporarily suspend work on tourist visas previously issued to citizens of the mentioned countries. It continued issuing tourist visas electronically or upon arrival to citizens of other countries previously permitted, stressing that tourist visa holders should not be allowed to visit the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah.<sup>38 39</sup>

**In March**, the Saudi Ministry of Health announced the Royal Order regarding “free treatment to all coronavirus casualties, whether citizens, residents or those who have violated residency regulations”. The cities of Riyadh, Makkah, Madinah and Jeddah were sealed off during the month and authorities also seized more than five million illegally stockpiled medical masks in two locations in the kingdom.<sup>40</sup> **In April**, the government announced that it will cover 60 per cent of the salaries of private-sector workers in industries and for companies forced to consider lay-offs due to the virus for the next three

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<sup>32</sup> <https://news.trust.org/item/20201005084043-7f270>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/10/09/homeless-migrants-sleep-rough-beneath-dubai-skyscrapers-covid/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2020/10/12/air-arabia-to-take-back-112-bangladeshi-expats-to-uae-for-free>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.gulftoday.ae/news/2020/11/02/50000-overseas-filipinos-repatriated-from-uae>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/25/uae-halts-new-visas-to-citizens-of-13-mostly-muslim-states>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1622491/saudi-arabia>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-outbreak/Covid-19-Saudi-Arabia-suspends-issuing-electronic-tourist-visas-for-several-countries>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1635161/world>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/coronavirus-saudi-arabia-to-treat-patients-for-free-1.999325>

months up to 9,000 Saudi riyal per month.<sup>41</sup> Despite rising cases, shops and malls, as well as construction companies and contractors, will be allowed to reopen or resume their work. Restaurants, cinemas and hair salons remained closed however, affecting the large sections of low-paid migrant workers in these industries.<sup>42</sup>

**In May**, the Health Ministry reported 4,233 new coronavirus cases to bring the total to 127,541, with 972 deaths, the highest among the six Gulf Arab states. Saudi Arabia allowed employees to return to offices, commercial centres to reopen and prayers at mosques to resume in a three-phase plan which began in April. A curfew is due to end by June 21.<sup>43</sup> **In June**, the Health Ministry reported 3,393 new cases of the Covid-19 coronavirus, along with 4,045 cases of recovery. Forty new deaths were also reported. The cases were reported in Riyadh (438), Jeddah (388), Dammam (345), Makkah (269), among others. With this, a total of 161,005 cases have been reported in the kingdom, along with 105,175 recoveries and 1,307 deaths. There are 54,523 active cases in the kingdom, and 2,045 are critical.<sup>44 45</sup> **In September**, although a circular issued by Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) said it was "suspending travel to and from the following countries - India, Brazil and Argentina", repatriation flights from the kingdom were still allowed to operate.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/saudi-government-to-cover-60-per-cent-of-salaries-amid-coronavirus-1.1001035>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/coronavirus-saudi-arabia-eases-lockdown-and-reopens-businesses-1.1010949>

<sup>43</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/covid-19-saudi-arabia-calls-for-compliance-as-cases-rise-1.72051312>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/coronavirus-saudi-arabia-reports-3393-new-covid-19-cases>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/business/timeline-saudi-arabia-s-precautionary-measures-against-covid-19-1.1017970>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/travel-hospitality/452224-saudi-arabia-bans-flights-from-india-amid-surg-ing-coronavirus-cases>

## Box 1: Detention & Forced Repatriation during COVID-19

**In September**, nearly 150 women and children were repatriated to Ethiopia from Saudi Arabia, following pressure from governments and human rights groups to release African migrants detained in deplorable conditions in the Middle East country. This was further followed by other nationalities that were in detention facilities being repatriated. Conditions in detention camps deteriorated during COVID where detainees were being fed little food for months, according to the BBC. Ethiopian officials promised to repatriate 2,000 migrants at an emergency conference after accusations of a deliberate cover-up of the abuse in a second Telegraph report. The African migrants in Saudi Arabia were rounded up in their homes and listed for deportations earlier this year as part of efforts to curb coronavirus spread. Geo-location evidence suggests there are likely many more detention camps packed with migrants in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Migrants from Africa and Asia have been trapped in the country partly as a result of the pandemic but also due to the loss of jobs and ensuing loss of documentation. When the pandemic struck in March, the Saudi government in the capital Riyadh feared migrants workers, who are often housed in overcrowded conditions, would act as vectors for the virus. Almost 3,000 Ethiopians were deported by the Saudi security services back to Ethiopia in the first ten days of April and a leaked UN memo said a further 200,000 were to follow. A moratorium was then placed on the deportations after international pressure was brought upon Riyadh. Several of the migrants said they had been rounded up from their homes in various Saudi Arabian cities before being placed in the camps.

(Source: Telegraph. Retrieved at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish/>)

**In October**, the European Parliament condemned Saudi Arabia for holding tens of thousands of Ethiopian migrants in cramped detention camps based upon report by the Telegraph, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty. The measure was voted through by a large majority, with 413 votes in favour and 49 against, and 233 abstentions. The resolution calls on Saudi Arabia to "immediately end torture and other ill treatment" of tens of thousands of Ethiopian men, women and children who have been stuck in detention facilities there for months on end. It also calls for the immediate release of the migrants and demands an "independent and impartial investigation" into the reports of torture and deaths in the detention centres.<sup>47</sup>

**In November**, the Ministry of Human Resource and Social Development announced major reforms to the labour system and is expected to be implemented as of March 2021. The resolution mainly deals with the mobility of workers. It will allow foreign employees to: (i) leave their jobs without the consent of the employer/kafeel upon the expiration of their employment contracts; and (ii) leave their jobs prior to the expiration of the employment contract, provided that the worker has been in the country for at least a year and has given 90 days' notice to the employer. In addition, under certain conditions, the resolution also permits migrant workers to change jobs within the first year of employment. Finally, the ministry has established an electronic portal where both workers and employers may submit notifications, job offers, and transfer requests, a task previously within only the sponsor's discretion. However human rights activists mention that it does not specify whether employers can report workers for "absconding" from the workplace and/or accommodation. They further argue for a full abolition (of

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-ethiopian-migrants-eu-parliament>

kafala system) despite partial reforms being ‘significant’. Moreover, overstaying exit visas continue to attract fines of SR 1,000.<sup>48 49 50</sup>

**In December**, reports mentioned that several companies have as yet failed to pay their employees with migrant workers protesting for wages and better living conditions. For instance, the Huta Marine group, which employs at least 6,000 people, had workers strike after not receiving their salaries for the last ten months, forcing some to go hungry and beg for food. Employees also complained that the private company had shut off electricity and water to the work camp where they have lived for the last four days.<sup>51</sup> On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Saudi Migrant Workers’ Accommodation Regulatory Commission said it was working on two tracks to facilitate the private sector’s procedures for verifying the quality and environment of group housing and adherence to the specified standards. The first track obliges the owners of companies to disclose their labour accommodation sites through the group housing platform. The second track is on licensing real estate according to the health, technical and safety standards for group housing for individuals through the Baladi platform.<sup>52</sup>

**In January**, Saudi Arabia agreed to lift its land and air blockade on Qatar in a major step towards ending a Gulf rift that started more than three years ago. In 2017, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing how the blockade was infringing on the rights of individual citizens and residents in the Gulf, causing rights abuses, suffering and family separations. The blockading countries intensified the crackdown on free speech during the crisis, often accusing dissidents of conspiring with Qatar. For example, in Saudi Arabia, renowned Islamic scholar Salman al-Ouda was arrested in 2017 after sending a tweet praying for unity between Gulf leaders for the "good of their people".<sup>53</sup>

### 2.1.1.3 Kuwait

**In February**, health ministries in Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan confirmed their first cases of the coronavirus.<sup>54</sup> **In March**, Kuwait announced curfews with heavy penalties for violators and suspended government and private sectors for two weeks.<sup>55</sup> **In May**, Kuwait extended the curfew until May 30 with extra measures such as suspending congregational prayers at mosques, suspending inbound and outbound flights, and extending the suspension of work in the public sector and suspending schools and universities until the August.<sup>56</sup> Repatriations funded and performed by the Kuwaiti government under their amnesty initiative faced criticism as returnees from Kuwait were found to have tested positive and countries of origin faced increase in imported infections from Kuwait. For instance, nearly 160 out of the 460 Sri Lankan men and women that returned tested positive and one returnee died from COVID-19 after arrival – most returnees were undocumented labourers and domestic workers

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<sup>48</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/international-news-dubai-migrant-workers-saudi-arabia-united-arab-emirates-6cb5e681b00893e200fec707d92dba06>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/global-hr/pages/saudi-arabia-labor-reform-initiative.aspx>

<sup>50</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-sr1000-fine-for-overstaying-exit-visa-1.75742585>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-migrant-workers-strike-wages-huta>

<sup>52</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-takes-steps-to-improve-workers-group-accommodation-1.76070657>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-qatar-end-blockade>

<sup>54</sup> <https://thenational.ae/world/gcc/coronavirus-kuwait-bahrain-oman-and-afghanistan-confirm-first-cases-1.983518>

<sup>55</sup> <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudi-kuwait-impose-evening-curfews-to-limit-spread-of-covid-19/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/covid-19-kuwait-imposes-total-curfew-from-may-10-30-1.1588953296343>

who lost their jobs during the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> **In June**, Kuwait began a five-phase plan to gradually lift restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus.

**In July**, Kuwait National Assembly committee approved a draft expat quota bill seeking to reduce the number of foreign workers in the Gulf country. Due to the pandemic, an increase in anti-migrant rhetoric prevailed and Kuwait's Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al Khalid Al Sabah proposed reducing the number of expats from 70% to 30% of the population. The bill further proposes quotas for different nationalities. The Assembly Speaker also made xenophobic comments stating that majority of expatriates (comprising 70% of the population) are 'either illiterate or can merely read and write', the people Kuwait does not really need'. Media narratives in Kuwait also possessed racist undertones, linking the necessity of the quota bill to the spread of the infection among migrant workers living in overcrowded housing.<sup>58</sup> **In August**, Kuwait banned all commercial flights to 31 countries it said that it regarded as high risk due to the spread of the coronavirus – including India, Pakistan, Egypt, the Philippines, Lebanon and Sri Lanka, which all have large numbers of expatriates in Kuwait. The list also includes China, Iran, Brazil, Mexico, Italy and Iraq.<sup>59,60</sup>

**In September**, it was reported that the average salary for domestic workers in the black market had reached 400 Kuwaiti dinars (Dh4,795) due to visas being halted and the repatriation of domestic workers that lost their jobs. For almost nine months, Kuwait had put a ban on recruiting domestic workers from 25 countries, 23 of which are African and the other two are Indonesia and Bhutan. Sub-agents in Kuwait took advantage of this situation by increasing the charges of domestic worker services for 25 Kuwaiti dinars per hour and 250 Kuwaiti dinars per month. The domestic worker gets 10 Kuwaiti dinars for four hours of work and 15 Kuwaiti dinars goes to the broker.<sup>61</sup> **By November**, however, Kuwait's Cabinet of Ministers approved the return of domestic workers stuck abroad. The government has given permission to the Corona Emergency Committee, headed by the Minister of Interior, to prepare a report on the return policy, including finalising the procedures and requirements for the return of domestic workers to ensure the safety of all.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, in a statement by the head of the Federation of Domestic Workers Offices, Khaled Al Dakhan, revealed that around 70 per cent of domestic workers in Kuwait have expired contracts. This is due to the inability to travel and the ban on issuing new visas for domestic workers forcing existing domestic labour force to take up the work. For almost nine months, Kuwait has put a ban on recruiting domestic workers from 25 countries, 23 of which are African and the other two are Indonesia and Bhutan.<sup>63</sup>

In November, Kuwait announced it will begin to implement from January, a decision to ban the renewal of work and residence permits for expatriates who reach the age of 60, affecting more than 70,000 expatriates. The deadline for migrants covered by the ban to leave Kuwait will be set by the General

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/culture-society/447427-almost-160-sri-lankans-repatriated-from-kuwait-test-positive-for-covid-19>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/eight-lakh-indians-may-be-forced-to-leave-kuwait-as-the-country-approves-expat-quota-bill/article32000615.ece>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1713126/middle-east>

<sup>60</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-covid-19-tally-hits-104568-with-587-new-cases-1.74218881>

<sup>61</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/covid-19-kuwait-domestic-workers-salaries-surge-to-dh4795-in-black-market-1.74189836>

<sup>62</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-gives-green-light-for-return-of-domestic-workers-1.75210858>

<sup>63</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/70-of-domestic-workers-in-kuwait-have-expired-contracts-1.75626878>

Department of Residency Affairs from one to three months.<sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> **In December**, the Ministry of Public Works decided to terminate the service of 80 expatriate employees, as the country is seeking to curtail hiring of migrant workers.<sup>66</sup> **In January**, a report from the Interior Ministry revealed that a total of 8,143 expatriates were deported from Kuwait in 2020. The deportees included 6,003 handed over by the residency affairs police and 2,140 others by other sectors of the Interior Ministry, the report published by Al Jarida newspaper said. It further specified that Egyptian expatriates accounted for the majority of overall suspects in offences, including 221 or 69.7 per cent in criminal cases and 176 or 64.5 per cent in misdemeanour cases.<sup>67</sup> The Ministry of Education also released a report that indicated that 54 per cent of the non-Kuwaiti teachers stuck abroad, whose residency's have expired, are no longer needed. Majority of those that are to be dismissed are educators that teach Islamic studies, art, computer science and music.<sup>68</sup>

## **2.1.2 Countries of Destination in South East Asia, East Asia and other parts of Asia**

### **2.1.2.1 Singapore**

The first infected migrant worker infection was reported on February 8, when a 39-year-old Bangladeshi construction worker caught the disease. In May, it was reported that although the Singapore government started testing in January, they had failed to test a majority of migrant workers having asked employers to not send the healthy workers for screening, even though the first infections were found among migrant workers, according to a media report. The report further says the Singapore government claimed that it has developed the capacity to conduct more than 8,000 tests per day, it is still conducting about 3,000 tests a day on the migrant workers in the dormitories. As of May 20, a total of 29,364 people were affected, majority of whom are migrant workers from Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan and the Philippines.<sup>69</sup>

There are 323,000 low-wage migrant workers in the country, who take on jobs shunned by Singaporeans in industries such as construction, estate maintenance and manufacturing. Migrant workers in Singapore live in mega-dormitories (which house about 1000 workers each) factory-converted dormitories (housing 50 to 100 workers each), and temporary living quarters with around 40 workers on various construction sites. The first dormitory cluster was identified on March 30, with four infections at S11 dormitory. Cases among workers living in dormitories quickly ballooned to 2,689 – representing 60 per cent of all cases in Singapore – of which 979 came from the S11 dorm. Authorities have identified the 400,000 sq ft Mustafa Centre – popular with migrant workers, locals and tourists – as a starting point for the disease's spread among workers.<sup>70</sup> However instead of closing dormitories, Singapore has allowed workers to continue work, but with repeated testing, greater social distancing, close monitoring and rapid isolation of close contacts – this was in view of pandemic-induced recession.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/no-renewal-of-work-and-residency-permits-for-expats-aged-60-in-kuwait-1.75274226>

<sup>65</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/70000-expats-aged-60-to-leave-kuwait-in-2021-1.75546826>

<sup>66</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-ministry-sacks-80-expat-employees-1.75624361>

<sup>67</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/8143-expats-deported-from-kuwait-in-2020-1.76220810>

<sup>68</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-54-of-teachers-stuck-abroad-are-not-needed-1.76392182>

<sup>69</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/panorama/bangladeshi-workers-centre-singapores-covid-19-resurgence-83905>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3080466/how-did-migrant-worker-dormitories-become-singapores-biggest>

### **2.1.2.2 Thailand**

With lock-down measures in place in Thailand, border closures and restrictions on inter-provincial travel, it became very difficult for migrants to return home. Migration to Thailand in the Mekong region is performed through porous borders and as neither Thailand nor three countries of origin of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar were prepared for the large outflow of migrants, large numbers of migrants congregated on both sides of the borders during lockdown. Origin country governments, in particular the Government of Myanmar, made an appeal to migrants to delay their return, initially to April 15 and later extended to April 30 to allow time to set up proper quarantine facilities.<sup>71</sup> In December, Thailand announced its decision to offer a work permit that would allow undocumented migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to work in the country legally for about two years to curb the spread of COVID-19.<sup>72</sup> As recent as January, migrant workers were targets of hate speech and discrimination as ‘agents spreading the virus’ – with Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha accused illegal immigration of being behind the outbreak in a country that had brought COVID-19 under control, even though Thailand’s virus task force appealed for sympathy for immigrants.<sup>73</sup>

Based on the data of returnees from various countries of origin, 10 percent of the total documented migrant population from Thailand have returned due to loss of income/job or temporary layoffs. The COVID-19 relief program by the Thai government does not cover migrant workers. Hence, many migrants who lost their income and livelihood crossed the border amidst strict restrictions on mobility. Documented workers found it difficult to extend their work visa, and employers and government hardly offered any support to do the same. Women workers, especially domestic workers, had faced severe human rights violations during the lockdown.

### **2.1.2.3 Japan<sup>74</sup>**

Japan has performed better compared to other countries in Asian region in contracting the virus. However, international labour migrants from other countries have also suffered greatly from the spread of COVID-19 - migrant populations in Japan were always vulnerable to crisis situations due to lack of adequate support measures in place. For instance, cash handouts of 100,000 Yen by the government was conditional on having a resident registration (as of April 27). As a result, many migrant workers and foreign residents who require preventive health support were excluded from the target.

Japan's aging and shrinking population has created a shortage of workers in factories, agriculture and fisheries. At the same time, nationalist and exclusionist forces opposed to immigration have had a significant impact on Japan's immigration policy and have prevented the country from adopting a full-fledged immigration policy. As a result, Japan's policy of accepting labour in the form of "technical trainees" and "foreign students" continues. Foreigners who enter the country under these statuses are only guaranteed inadequate labor rights and limited access to social security, and human rights violations are frequent. Due to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, companies that employed technical intern trainees have gone bankrupt and factories and other facilities have closed, causing technical interns to lose their income and faced with a situation where they were unable to return home to make ends meet. These problems are still unresolved.

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<sup>71</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_741920.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741920.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> [Thailand offers work permits to undocumented migrants to curb COVID-19 | Reuters](#)

<sup>73</sup> [Anti-Myanmar hate speech flares in Thailand over spread of COVID | Coronavirus pandemic News | Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>74</sup> Information provided by Japanese country report - KMDF

Meanwhile, foreign nationals with stable residence rights in Japan also faced serious problems due to "waterfront measures" introduced by Japan during COVID-19. The Japanese government declared that once they have left the country, they will not be allowed to re-enter. As a result, foreigners living in Japan could not leave the country even if they had to. Also, foreigners who had left the country temporarily are not allowed to re-enter Japan. As a result, families have been divided and those with chronic diseases have been unable to receive treatment in Japan. Japan has been gradually loosening restrictions on re-entry since July, but many labour migrants still have problems getting in and out of Japan.

#### **2.1.2.4 Kazakhstan<sup>75</sup>**

Over 3.5 million migrants live in Kazakhstan, with half of them entered the country irregularly<sup>76</sup>. During the COVID outbreak, when businesses were closed, a large number of undocumented migrants remain economically vulnerable and live in uncertainty. With the closure of construction work in the country, illegal migrants were forced to take unpaid leave during the pandemic. Informally employed migrants often lack social protection and access to basic health care. Moreover, the conditions in which they live and work - overcrowded apartments, informal dwellings or even camps - exacerbate health risks. In addition, irregular migrants were not eligible to receive an allowance of 42,500 Tenge in Kazakhstan. Also, the expiration of visas, work permits can provoke departure of workers to the informal sector, pushing them into even greater vulnerability. Almost 2,000 Tajik and Uzbek citizens were stranded for over two months in Kazakhstan's southern region (Zhibek Zholy (Silk Road) checkpoint) because they were unable to return home due to restrictions. The government hardly offered any support to the huge irregular migrant population in the country in ensuring access to healthcare, housing and basic needs during the pandemic<sup>77</sup>.

## **2.2 GOVERNMENT RESPONSES IN COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN**

### **2.2.1 From South Asia**

#### **2.2.1.1 Nepal**

For Nepal, the pandemic had a huge impact upon their migrant workers, particularly cross-border migrants and those in Gulf countries. Nepali workers suffered from job losses and consequent undocumented status, leaving them vulnerable. Nepali migrants working in India had crowded near the border and were finally repatriated with the assistance of Indian authorities. However, for Nepali migrants stranded in Gulf states, Malaysia, and elsewhere were in desperate circumstances. Initially, Nepali authorities had made little provision for returning citizens because they had few facilities to quarantine them.<sup>78</sup> Particularly affected were women migrant workers, who migrated despite the government ban on women taking domestic jobs in the Gulf and consequently, fell under the undocumented category. These women migrants were excluded from all government repatriation and reintegration schemes, criticised for not being women-friendly.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Information from Country report -KMDF 2020

<sup>77</sup> <https://cabar.asia/en/experiences-of-labor-migrants-in-kazakhstan-during-covid-19-leave-or-stay>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/nepal-abandons-migrant-workers-fight-against-covid-19>

<sup>79</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/08/24/undocumented-migrant-workers-left-to-fend-for-themselves>

**In April**, Amnesty International reported that the Qatari government had illegally expelled dozens of Nepali migrant workers on the pretext of their test for COVID-19. The men interviewed, were booked from public places such as markets, on the pretext that they were going to be tested for COVID-19 and instead, they were taken to detention centres and held in appalling conditions for several days before being deported to Nepal without following due legal process. In response, The Qatari government said that it had uncovered individuals engaged in illegal and illicit activities, while inspecting the Industrial Area as part of the COVID-19 response.<sup>80</sup>

**In June**, Nepalis began to return home based upon the repatriation plan, approved by the High-level Coordination Committee for Prevention and Control of Covid-19. The work-plan identified 17 categories of Nepalis, including students, government officials, and individuals abroad to meet their family members, to be prioritised during repatriation. In the case of migrant workers, their repatriation application depends upon their status and vulnerability. Moreover, the government and the Foreign Employment Board had contradicting data regarding repatriation applications - the government said that an estimated 25,000 need urgent repatriation and the FEB earlier stated that 127,000 Nepali migrant workers are expected to return home immediately while another 407,000 are expected to return in the long-run due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>81</sup>

Nonetheless, through repatriation efforts, 169 Nepalis arrived from the United Arab Emirates—the first batch of migrant workers returning to Nepal. But those who arrived home either paid airfares on their own or they boarded the plane on the mercy of the companies they were working at. In fact, there was prevailing confusion among Missions regarding repatriation procedures and costs and despite the start of the repatriation mission, Missions sought clarity from the national government in this regard.<sup>82</sup> For instance, hundreds of undocumented Nepali workers registered to return home under the general amnesty by the Kuwait government. But due to the delay of Nepal government in allowing flights, they lived in a camp set up by the Kuwaiti government for more than 40 days. Of the nearly 7,000 undocumented Nepali workers in Kuwait, according to Kuwaiti government estimates, 3,500 have registered to return home under the general amnesty. These Nepalis have been sectioned into six different camps as they await a flight home.<sup>83</sup>

The repatriation plan drew heavy criticism from civil society in the country, who filed a writ petition at the Supreme Court to urge that rescue, repatriation and medical treatment of migrant workers should be free of charge. It further states that the requirement of migrant workers to bear the costs for airfare and hotel quarantine is against the country's constitution and governing legislations. The Civil Society Policy Paper on Repatriation and Reintegration of Migrant Workers, prepared among stakeholders from 47 districts of all seven provinces, contained more than 70 recommendations for the management of migrant workers in destination countries and their repatriation and reintegration.<sup>84</sup> Finally, the Supreme Court issued an interim order to the government to use the foreign employment welfare fund to repatriate Nepali workers living abroad in highly vulnerable conditions. The petitioners had demanded that the case of migrant workers should be viewed in a different light, as they contribute to the worker

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<sup>80</sup> <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/qatar-illegally-expelled-nepali-migrant-workers-during-covid-19-panic/>

<sup>81</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/05/government-underestimates-number-of-workers-awaiting-repatriation-say-experts>

<sup>82</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/07/authorities-plan-to-rescue-nepalis-stranded-abroad-but-no-one-knows-who-will-pay-for-it>

<sup>83</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/08/over-40-days-in-a-kuwaiti-camp-with-no-sign-of-returning-home>

<sup>84</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/04/migrant-rights-groups-slam-government-plan-to-charge-migrant-workers-for-their-repatriation>

welfare funds.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, the Tourism Ministry and Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal were forced to implement a price regulation for chartered flights organised by them. In the first phase, the Tourism Ministry authorized 67 chartered flights.<sup>86</sup>

On 12 **August**, the Nepal Embassy in the United Arab of Emirates published a notice on its official Facebook page informing that 13,785 migrant Nepalis had been repatriated through 82 flights since June. Comments replying to the post were from Nepali workers with criticisms and complaints against the embassy and the government of Nepal on the indecision and poor preparations displayed. The National Human Rights Commission in Nepal also released a report raising serious concerns over the situation of Nepal's migrant workers awaiting government help to return home and the clear lack of preparations in repatriation processes. When the government finally announced it would bring home the stranded migrant workers, things got delayed once again due to the repatriation guidelines full of procedural complexities, like ascertaining workers' status and who pays for their tickets. They further mentioned that Nepali missions have no record of Nepalis who have been infected or have died of the disease.<sup>87</sup> **In September**, after months of confusion, the government finally included undocumented Nepali workers into the COVID-19 pandemic repatriation scheme. As per the latest decision of the government, the repatriation cost of undocumented Nepali migrant workers would be covered by the Covid-19 Prevention, Control and Treatment Fund, said Minister Yadav.<sup>8889</sup>

**In December**, the Department of Foreign Employment reported that despite MoU's with destination countries on "zero-cost" jobs to Nepali workers, the provision has not been implemented well, reflected in grievances received by the department in the past year. According to Kumar Prasad Dahal, director general at the department, more than 75 percent of the complaints are related to workers being overcharged for jobs in the Persian Gulf countries, Malaysia and Europe, with workers paying between Rs130,000 to Rs700,000 for jobs in the Gulf and Malaysia.<sup>90</sup> In another study published by IOM Nepal, it was revealed that most returnees are not willing to go back abroad and would prefer to work in the country itself. The report has mentioned that agriculture, tourism, travel agencies, restaurants, catering business and fast-food shops are the sectors that the returnees have prioritised to be involved in. As per the report, 36 per cent returnees want to work in the agriculture sector. Under the agriculture sector, poultry, fruit, vegetable and tea farming are the top-most prioritised sectors. Similarly, 31.1 per cent of returnee workers want to work in the services sector. Under this category, 65.6 per cent returnees have shown an interest to work in the tourism industry.<sup>91</sup>

On International Migrants Day, the NHRIs of Nepal and Malaysia signed an agreement to extend collaboration and prioritise the registration and sharing of complaints and monitoring of human rights

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<sup>85</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/17/supreme-court-orders-government-to-use-welfare-fund-to-repatriate-nepali-workers-stranded-abroad#:~:text=On%20May%2025%2C%20in%20order,should%20be%20borne%20by%20them.>

<sup>86</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/11/airfare-for-international-chartered-repatriation-flights-capped-as-government-lists-new-flying-rules>

<sup>87</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/08/14/government-indecision-and-poor-preparations-behind-slowish-repatriation-of-migrant-workers-national-rights-watchdog-says>

<sup>88</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/09/11/undocumented-migrant-workers-to-get-government-support-for-returning-home>

<sup>89</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/03/23/nepal-goes-under-lockdown-for-a-week-starting-6am-tuesday>

<sup>90</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/12/19/nepali-migrant-workers-continue-to-dole-out-hefty-amounts-for-overseas-jobs>

<sup>91</sup> [Returnee migrants prioritise tourism and agriculture - The Himalayan Times - Nepal's No.1 English Daily Newspaper | Nepal News, Latest Politics, Business, World, Sports, Entertainment, Travel, Life Style News](https://www.himalayan-times.com/returnee-migrants-prioritise-tourism-and-agriculture)

violations of migrant workers from both nations. As per the agreement, Nepali workers in Malaysia can file a complaint at the National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia if the worker does not receive the facilities and perks as mentioned in the contract.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, NHRIs of Philippines, Nepal and Maldives issued a joint call upon states to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of migrant workers and their families, and commit to take action to support the rights of workers to remedy for wage theft and other human rights abuses against migrant workers. They further pledged to take action to • Investigate, receive complaints, and document cases and patterns of wage theft • Mediate between workers, employers, and recruitment agents • Litigate for justice and remedy for migrant workers, if within the mandate of NHRI concerned • Build cooperation between NHRIs in countries of origin and destination to better protect the rights of migrant workers.<sup>93</sup>

**In January**, the DoFE arranged for migrants to renew their labour permit online. Until now, workers were unable to access facilities provided by Foreign Employment Welfare Fund just because they were unable to renew their labour permit on time. The department has said that the online service is also expected to address this issue and such cases will likely drop significantly in the coming days.<sup>94</sup>

### 2.2.1.2 India

**In May**, 6,037 Indians were reported to have flown back to India in 31 inbound flights operated by Air India and Air India Express under Vande Bharat Mission in five days beginning from May 7. A total of 64 flights were operated to 12 countries viz. USA, UK Bangladesh, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Philippines, UAE and Malaysia to repatriate 14,800 Indians back in the first phase. The second phase of the Vande Bharat Mission took place from May 16-22 and aimed at 31 countries.<sup>95</sup> **In July**, the state government of Kerala was reported to roll out a "Dream Kerala Project" to tap the potential and experience of those returning from abroad and other states after losing their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government has taken several steps to utilise the investments of Non-Resident Investors for the state's development and to ensure a stable income for returning expatriates.<sup>97</sup>

**By August**, the Vande Bharat Mission had repatriated Indians from 94 countries to different states in India. The highest number of Indian expats who have been brought back to India is from the UAE (around 400,000). UAE is followed by other Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia from where more than 1,63,000 Indians were brought back to India. Oman, Qatar and Kuwait also added to a significant number of people who came back to India from these countries.<sup>98</sup> However, there have been criticisms with regards to the pre-flight medical testing and sanitization procedures of the aircrafts. For instance, Hong Kong banned Air India's Vande Bharat mission flight from August 18 to August 31 due to poor pre-flight COVID-19 testing. Similar issues rose with Qatar, UAE and KSA.<sup>99</sup> Phase 5 of the mission

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<sup>92</sup> [Nepali and Malaysian human rights bodies extend cooperation to protect migrant workers \(kathmandupost.com\)](https://www.kathmandupost.com)

<sup>93</sup> [FINAL NHRI STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY.pdf \(nhrconepal.org\)](https://www.nhrconepal.org)

<sup>94</sup> <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/online-renewal-of-labour-permits-starts/>

<sup>95</sup> <https://zeenews.india.com/india/vande-bharat-mission-india-to-begin-second-phase-of-repatriation-from-may-16-amid-coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown-2282970.html>

<sup>96</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/visa-and-immigration/indians-pack-their-bags-for-home/articleshow/74602434.cms>

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/dream-kerala-project-kerala-announces-project-to-help-expats-who-lost-jobs-due-to-coronavirus-2255564>

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/air-india-ferries-12-lakh-people-vande-bharat-plan>

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.india.com/business/international-flights-this-country-bans-air-indias-vande-bharat-mission-flights-for-2-weeks-amid-covid-pandemic-4114853/>

was expected to start in August but all commercial international flights apart from repatriation flights were banned till the end of September.<sup>100 101</sup>

**In September**, Minister of State for Labour and Employment, Santosh Gangwar, said while statewise data was “not available on assistance provided to migrant workers,” India as a nation responded to the “unprecedented human crisis” through the various governments, local bodies, self-help groups and non-governmental organisations and professionals. Asked by seven MPs if “thousands of migrant labourers have died during lockdown,” Gangwar replied that “no such data is available”.<sup>102</sup> **In December**, the Minimum Wage Notification issued by the Ministry of External Affairs drew flak as it reduced the minimum referral wage for workers going Gulf countries by almost 40 per cent. The Overseas Employment and Protector General of Emigrants Division in The Ministry of External Affairs issued two separate circulars on September 8 and 21 to reduce the minimum referral wage for workers going to Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the UAE to the US \$ 200 (Approximately Rs.15,000), Kuwait (\$ 245) and Saudi Arabia (\$ 324).<sup>103</sup>

**In January**, it was revealed through RTI enquiries that hundreds of labour cases remained unresolved at Indian Missions abroad. The Indian embassy in Saudi Arabia could resolve only 27 percent of labour cases filed by Indian migrant workers between Jan and December 2020. (645 out of 2376 cases). In Oman, the Indian embassy could resolve only 40 percent of the labour cases filed by Indian migrant workers between Jan and December 2020. (414 out of 1030 cases filed).<sup>104</sup> Moreover, in Kerala state, it was reported as per figures compiled by the Department of Non-Resident Keralites Affairs that 8.43 lakh people returned to Kerala from foreign countries between the first week of May 2020 and January 4 this year. Of them, 5.52 lakh said they had lost their jobs — with 1.40 lakh of them returning in the last 30 days. Another big chunk of returnees, 2.08 lakh, stated that their job visas had expired or mentioned other reasons for their return. The rest include senior citizens, or children, and family members of expatriates.<sup>105</sup>

### **2.2.1.3 Bangladesh**

**Since March**, hundreds of thousands of international migrant workers were compelled to return to their home districts in Bangladesh due to limited access to income-generating activities, social services, healthcare systems and social support networks in the countries in which they were working prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. A total of 64 percent of international migrants indicated that following the outbreak they struggled to access information and health services in the countries in which they were working in. A total of 29 percent of respondents indicated they had returned to Bangladesh because they were asked to leave the country they were in while 23 percent reported that they were worried about COVID-19 and wished to return to their families. Moreover, 26 percent of respondents reported that they had returned because their families had asked them to, and nine percent returned because they were told that the borders were going to be closed and they were worried that they would be left

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<sup>100</sup> <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-more-destinations-added-for-phase-5-of-vande-bharat-mission-starting-from-aug-1-civil-aviation-minister-2834195>

<sup>101</sup> <https://www.india.com/business/unlock-4-international-flights-banned-till-september-30-vande-bharat-mission-to-continue-for-now-4127007/>

<sup>102</sup> [Centre Says It Has No Data on How Many Migrant Workers Died in the COVID-19 Lockdown \(thewire.in\)](#)

<sup>103</sup> [Telangana MLC demands immediate rollback of Minimum Wage notification by MEA - India News \(indiatoday.in\)](#)

<sup>104</sup> [Unresolved Labour Cases Pileup at Indian Embassies | NewsClick](#)

<sup>105</sup> [Covid effect: 8.4 lakh migrants back in Kerala from abroad, 5.5 lakh lost their jobs | India News, The Indian Express](#)

stranded. At the time of the interviews, a total of 55 percent of the respondents who had returned from abroad had accumulated unpaid debt. The respondents owed a debt to family and friends (55 percent) and to micro-finance institutions (MFIs), Self Help Groups and NGOs (44 percent) and moneylenders (15 percent).<sup>106</sup>

**In April**, a UN interagency memo, led by the World Health Organization, said that Bangladesh was ill-prepared to tackle the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The internal memo, issued on March 26, warned that the country's health system would collapse during the first wave of the pandemic. The memo, which was later published by the Sweden-based investigative news site Netra News, also noted that if the government did not take adequate action, up to 2 million would die. However, Netra News faced retaliatory action from the Bangladeshi government (specifically the Information Minister), who discredited the memo as 'rumors floated by anti-state activists. Civil society alleges that the report by Netra News was a public service report and has been unfairly suppressed to prevent embarrassment to the government. In a recent report, Human Rights Watch observed that "since mid-March 2020, the authorities have arrested at least a dozen people, including a doctor, opposition activists, and students, for their comments about coronavirus, most of them under the draconian Digital Security Act." Amnesty International noted: "The Digital Security Act criminalizes many forms of freedom of expression and imposes hefty fines and prison sentences for legitimate forms of dissent. It is incompatible with international law and standards and should be amended immediately." The government even tried to install 15 government officials as monitors at Bangladeshi private television channels to see if those channels "were running any propaganda or rumors about the novel coronavirus outbreak." However, amid an outcry, the plan was scrapped.<sup>107</sup>

**In June**, it was reported that the pandemic claimed the lives of more than 1,000 Bangladeshi expatriates living in different parts of the world. The highest number of deaths was recorded in Saudi Arabia, the leading destination of Bangladeshi migrants. The UK comes second on the list, with 305 deaths, followed by the US where at least 272 Bangladeshis have succumbed to the virus. As for other countries, the number of infected Bangladeshis is around 4,000 in Qatar, 4,000 in the UAE, 1,100 in the Maldives, 1,000 in Kuwait, and 700 in Bahrain.<sup>108</sup>

**In July**, Malaysian authorities arrested a Bangladeshi man who criticised on television the country's treatment of undocumented migrants during the coronavirus pandemic. In a documentary on Al Jazeera, Rayhan Kabir said the government discriminated against irregular foreign workers by arresting and jailing them. The raid upon migrant worker accommodation and their consequent arrest and deportation drew widespread criticism despite authorities claiming it was to curb the spread of the virus – however, those deported included undocumented workers, women, children and Rohingya refugees. Malaysian Police launched an investigation into the documentary Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown, broadcast on 3 July, following complaints by officials and local media that it was "inaccurate, misleading and unfair". An arrest warrant was issued for Mr Kabir - whose work permit was revoked after the programme aired - and he was arrested for his interview in the documentary.<sup>109</sup>

Within the country, Bangladeshi authorities arrested the owner of a hospital who they said had sold migrant workers thousands of certificates showing a negative result on coronavirus tests, when in fact many tests were never performed. The fake certificates, costing 59\$ a piece, enabled migrant workers

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<sup>106</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/08/12/70pc-of-migrants-returning-to-bangladesh-struggle-to-find-employment-iom>

<sup>107</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/bangladesh-is-suppressing-free-speech-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>108</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/migration/covid-19-bangladeshi-expats-death-toll-exceeds-1000-94717>

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53537312>

to return to the destination countries in Europe and the Middle East, where employer required testing to be done prior to departure. The investigation was begun after Italy suspended all flights from Bangladesh due to 37 Bangladeshi passengers in Rome testing positive for COVID-19. Italy also sent back 168 Bangladeshis who had arrived at airports in Rome and Milan, Italy's health ministry confirmed.<sup>110</sup>

**In August**, around 64,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers returned home from 23 countries. Among those who returned, 61,215 were males while 2,748 are female workers. According to reports, 59% of these migrant workers returned home after losing their jobs abroad. For those that returned home in February and March, were still in a state of uncertainty as many of them could not collect their salaries, while many others had no confirmation from their employers on the possibility of re-joining their jobs. Meanwhile, those who have tried to go back to their jobs abroad are now facing many hurdles such as with Covid-19 test reports and high prices of air tickets, Shariful added.<sup>111</sup>

Regarding returnees, the IOM reported that around 70 percent of the Bangladeshi migrant workers who have returned home amid the pandemic are struggling to find employment. The returnees experience reintegration challenges, including difficulties in securing employment, financial problems such as lack of income and accumulating debt, and health-related issues. It further reported that unplanned and large-scale returns of unemployed migrant workers affect remittance-dependent communities across the country where each migrant worker supports three members of his or her household on average. The government was reported to have allocated 2 billion taka (\$23.6 million) as a stimulus package and another 5 billion taka for low-interest loan support to rehabilitate and send back jobless workers. The Expatriate Welfare Board stated that “workers rendered jobless due to Covid-19 and their family members can apply for loans of 100,000 to 500,000 taka from the Expatriate Welfare Bank with only 4 percent interest in order to start alternative livelihoods,” she added.<sup>112</sup>

**In September**, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad reported to the Parliament that the number of Bangladeshi migrant workers returning from abroad due to the global coronavirus pandemic was not "alarming" as ‘a small number of workers, who were in deportation centres due to coronavirus pandemic, have returned as different countries have deported irregular workers’. For those migrants that wanted to return to destination, the decisions made by countries of destination failed to give them time to prepare for their return. For instance, Saudi authorities set a 48-hour deadline for Bangladeshi migrant workers to reach the kingdom after giving samples for coronavirus tests. However, migrant workers were given little time to prepare for the flight and only one centre to give samples.<sup>113 114</sup> **In October**, the Expatriates Welfare Desk at Dhaka airport reported that a total of 473 migrant women's bodies have been returned to the country from the Middle East from 2016 till September 2020 (from January to September 2020, the bodies of 63 women arrived from KSA, Lebanon, Jordan, Oman and UAE). Among them, the highest at least 81 died by suicide, including 51 in Saudi Arabia alone. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment sent a report to the parliamentary standing committee concerned in August 2019. The report said that they had talked

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<sup>110</sup> <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/world-news-politics/big-business-in-bangladesh-selling-fake-coronavirus-certificates-862367.html>

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/08/19/64-000-bangladeshi-migrant-workers-return-home-due-to-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/covid-19-leaves-bangladeshi-migrant-workers-out-in-the-cold/89210#>

<sup>113</sup> <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/short-deadline-spells-trouble-for-saudi-bound-bangladeshi-migrants-1601279100>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/covid-19-fallout-number-migrant-workers-returning-bangladesh-not-alarming-says-minister-1958513>

to about 110 female domestic workers who returned from Saudi Arabia and 35 percent of them returned home after being physically and sexually abused, while 44 percent of these women were not paid regularly.<sup>115</sup>

**In December**, statistics released by Expatriates' Welfare Desk at Dhaka airport showed that a total of 326,758 workers came back home due to joblessness from 29 countries during the period between April 01 and November 30 2020. Besides, nearly 150,000 workers came home 'on leave' from different countries including Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Singapore and the Maldives. But they could not go back to their workplaces due to Iqama (work permit) and air ticket related complications. As part of reintegration support by the government, a fund worth Tk 2 billion was launched in July. But civil society report that workers are unable to fulfil the conditions to apply for a loan and only 355 returnees have so far received the loan since its inauguration. The government also initiated a skills certification programme-Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)- to help returnee migrant workers get jobs at home and abroad. But this programme has also been affected due to lack of publicity and job placement opportunities. Eighty-one workers have participated in the RPL to get their skills certified since it started.<sup>116</sup>

#### **2.2.1.4 Sri Lanka**

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) and embassies made decisive strides in offering assistance to the workers in Gulf countries. The measures taken include attending to all inquiries, clearing visa matters, renewal of employment contracts, facilitating entry into hospitals and quarantine centres, distribution of dry rations and cooked meals and facilitating assistance to COVID-19 positive patients on a daily basis. The embassy of UAE also provides to the expatriate community, protective masks, sanitizers and other requisites. The Sri Lankan government also created an exclusive portal, 'Contact Sri Lanka', for assisting the overseas Sri Lankan workers during the crisis and over 55000 migrants have already registered in the portal for assistance.<sup>117</sup>

#### **2.2.1.5 Pakistan**

There are currently approximately 11 million Pakistani labour migrants globally, over 90% of whom are based in the Gulf States<sup>118</sup>. The closure of air mobility since March 25<sup>th</sup> affected the migrant population, especially in GCC countries. The Pakistani government had initiated repatriation of the stranded migrants only after constant pressure from the destination countries and migrants in end of April. Many of the returned migrants were tested positive upon arrival and it developed an anti-migrant sentiment across the sub-continent. A few Pakistani Missions at destinations offered support services for the migrants such as delivery of food packets, protective gears etc. However, the lack of reintegration programs and lack of effective interventions from the embassies to ensure the rights of the migrant workers showcased the poor response of the government to the crisis. In November, the State Bank of Pakistan warned over possible forced repatriation of overseas workers that could economic issues and urged the government to develop a comprehensive migration policy taking in consideration repatriation and reintegration efforts.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/473-women-migrant-workers-dead-abroad-2016-175-saudi-arabia-alone-1987181>

<sup>116</sup> <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/reintegration-support-still-elusive-1608394714>

<sup>117</sup> The portal jointly created by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Information & Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) for the benefit of Overseas Sri Lankans, was launched on Thursday (26 March 2020). It can be accessed at [www.contactsrilanka.mfa.gov.lk](http://www.contactsrilanka.mfa.gov.lk)

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.routedmagazine.com/covid-pakistan-perspective>

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1591542/sbp-warns-of-forced-repatriation-of-overseas-pakistani-workers>

## **2.2.2 From South East Asia and other regions**

### **2.2.2.1 Philippines**

The Philippines government was one of the earliest actors to the COVID-19 pandemic by announcing lockdown from 16th March, 2020. As a major country of origin in Asia, the announcement of lockdown created concern among the migrants in destination countries and also among the families left behind in the Philippines. Philippines had barred migrants from travelling to China, Hongkong and Macau in the initial stages of the outbreak. Consequently, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) announced a one-time financial assistance of 10000 Philippine pesos (Equivalent to 200 US dollars) towards the workers in the Gulf countries once those countries began reporting cases<sup>vi</sup>. The Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) can avail the assistance at both countries of destination and at the Philippines.

Missions also carried out repatriation efforts through the national carrier free of cost. This also included undocumented workers using the amnesty in Kuwait - Philippines managed to bring back 1500 workers from Kuwait<sup>vii</sup>. The government also offered transportation facilities for the Filipino migrants to and from airports, apart from regular services such as hotline numbers for COVID-19 assistance, labour camp visits etc offered by the embassies in the destination countries. Apart from immediate repatriation assistance, agencies such as OWWA, POEA offers a number of reintegration services for the return migrants. Recently, sanctions on recruitment from the country were lifted and the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) and the subsidiary agencies were preparing for labour migration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.2.2.2 Cambodia**

Unlike many other countries in the region Cambodia was one of the least affected countries in terms of the cases reported. However, the country and its citizens are experiencing repercussions of global lockdowns and the absence of mobility. Since the country did not impose strong lockdowns as a measure of containment, the economic impact may not be as severe as other countries. However, migrants are the most vulnerable category in the country. The pandemic has caused loss of jobs and income for many, including migrant workers, and they are forced to return to their home country. Cambodian migrant returnees from Thailand, mostly irregular migrants, were required to undergo mandatory 14-days quarantine in their communities. Most of the returnees were in dire need of food, masks, and sanitiser for prevention of COVID-19. Returnee migrant workers also faced discrimination and stigmatization as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.2.2.3 Indonesia**

The lockdown in Indonesia affected many family businesses owned by migrant workers and their families. According to the Head of the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19, 144,327 Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) have returned to Indonesia. According to the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), 103 thousand of them have resided in their respective hometowns<sup>120</sup>. Meanwhile, prospective migrant workers who have temporarily been in the recruitment agency's shelter are not allowed to be dispatched. Moreover, recruitment agencies have requested 10 million rupiah or land certificate guarantee-deposit from the employers to ensure that the Indonesian migrant worker candidates will be sent home due to the COVID-19 pandemic and during which time they can wait for her / his placement.

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<sup>120</sup> <https://mediaindonesia.com/read/detail/322302-pemerintah-harus-pikirkan-nasib-pekerja-migran-terdampak-covid-19>.

### 2.3 CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

Most COO's and COD's in Asia were less prepared to manage such an extreme health crisis and immediate socio-economic impacts. Civil society organisations (CSOs) across the world have risen to the COVID-19 challenge and filled gaps left by governments and business. Even though the operational freedom in many countries in the region was limited, CSOs responded in an effective and resilient manner. At the grassroots level, civil society acted to provide basic needs to marginalised and vulnerable populations such as migrant workers, refugees, undocumented workers, domestic workers and migrant families. CSOs provided information about the pandemic to migrant workers and delivered health and economic support in association with government and other actors. Relationships of trust built over years of advocacy have enabled migrant communities to engage with containment strategies.

At the policy level, CSOs have been instrumental in advocating for effective and rights-based responses from governments at different levels to ensure the rights of migrant workers in both destination and origin. It has acted with governments to ensure the effective delivery of vital public health messages. It challenged governments when they have failed to act, or when they acted in a discriminatory way. Sometimes it acted as a bridge between the government and migrant communities and furthermore, acted to hold government accountable and to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers. Working with governments, individual philanthropists and international agencies and actors, CSOs have demonstrated the importance of a dynamic civil society for an effective government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a network of CSOs which believe that migrant rights and human rights, MFA members and partners have responded swiftly to the crisis in many ways and countries. Overall, MFA has worked as a focal point linking up partners based in both COOs and CODs to ensure the rights and welfare of all migrant workers across the continent. MFA's members and partners have reached out to people in crisis regardless of the migrant status and delivered necessary services. CSOs and trade unions in both CODs and COOs shifted their focus from long-term objectives to immediate relief activities for stranded, jobless migrants. They either work in tandem with the local or national government or fill up gaps left by the governments. They have also come up with new advocacy strategies with the government to support migrants.

MFA partners in the Asia-Pacific region were active from February when the first COVID-19 cases started being reported in East Asia, with a more sustained response from the second week of March when countries first started announcing lockdowns. Partners in countries such as **Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan** have delivered, and continue to deliver support services for migrant workers and refugees in the form of food, shelter and other basic amenities. Information dissemination among migrants helped to create awareness about the health crisis and provided advice on preventive measures. Distribution of protective gear was also carried out. Partners in the **Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia and Indonesia** assisted and advocated for migrant workers who were either stranded in destination countries or who had returned home during the crisis. As the gravity of the situation escalated in other parts of Asia, including **South Asia and West Asia**, MFA partners engaged fully in relief and advocacy activities. Through cross-collaboration, members and partners of MFA were able to use the MFA platform to network and offer support to each other. The partners in **Gulf countries** supported migrants who lost jobs due to the crisis as well as undocumented workers who could not access any services, and migrant workers who were stranded in poor working and living conditions due to lockdown. With the support of the MFA network in origin countries partners in the destination country identified migrants in real need of humanitarian assistance and acted

as a bridge between the host country government and Missions to ensure the smooth repatriation of the workers. From the beginning of March, MFA partners in **Gulf countries** also distributed reliable online and offline information, in the languages of different migrant communities, about the pandemic and precautions needed to protect the workers from infections. This was also important to counter disinformation and false narratives about the pandemic which were spreading in these countries.

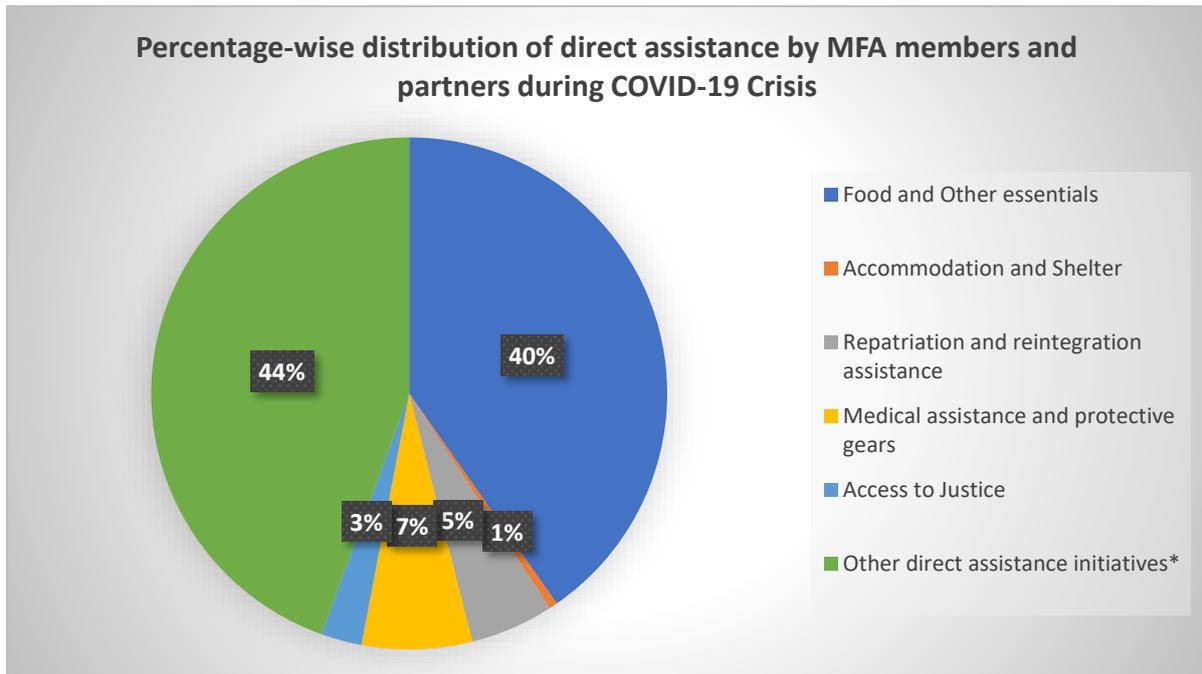
MFA partners in major **countries of origin** have also operated in a three-dimensional manner. Initially, they co-ordinated with their partners in the destination country to ensure the well-being of the workers, especially the unskilled workers and women, through helpline services and social media. Secondly, they advocated with the government and Missions abroad to ensure the well-being of workers in the destination country by submitting memorandums, releasing statements and by attempting to influence the policymakers. These interventions from the beginning of lockdown had forced many COOs to develop comprehensive repatriation strategies. Finally, MFA partners supported internal migrant workers who travel within national borders for work. In countries such as India and Bangladesh, millions of migrant workers have been stranded at their workplace due to sudden lockdown announcements. These migrant workers were in dire need of basic amenities due to lack of income and work. MFA partners supported internally stranded workers in several countries by providing food packets, shelter, protective gear, health check-ups etc.

A number of partners prepared situational analysis reports which have included policy and programme suggestions for governments. The short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies for return, repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers were have been prepared and submitted to the governments and partnering networks.

The major ongoing activities of MFA partners during the pandemic situation are the following:

- ❖ Provision of food and essentials for stranded migrants and families in country of origin, destination and also for internal migrants.
- ❖ Medical assistance and distribution of protective gear.
- ❖ Strengthening advocacy to ensure basic human rights of migrant workers.
- ❖ Online and offline awareness campaigns on the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ❖ Helpline services for migrants in distress.
- ❖ Ensuring access to justice including case/complaints filing.
- ❖ Co-ordinating efforts with government and other stakeholders.
- ❖ Conducting basic situational analysis about the conditions of the migrant workers at destination countries and upon return.
- ❖ Strengthening networks regionally and globally to fight the human rights violations.
- ❖ Developing strategies for post- COVID-19 world of work.
- ❖ Assisting repatriation and amnesty in destination countries.
- ❖ Assistance for quarantine and post-repatriation life.
- ❖ Welfare support for return migrants and their families.

**Figure 5: Percentage-wise distribution of direct assistance by CSOs during COVID-19 crisis**



\*Other direct assistance initiatives include mobile top-up recharge for the workers, financial assistance and so on. These numbers are provided by the members and partners of MFA.

### 2.3.1 Country-wise reports of CSO responses



#### 2.3.1.1 Bangladesh

As one of the major countries of origin in the region, Bangladesh has experienced a difficult time during the crisis. The ongoing lockdown from March 29th and the stoppage of airline operations made life extremely difficult and often dire for Bangladeshi workers abroad, the immigrants and refugees in Bangladesh, and internal migrant workers in the country. Many migrant workers lost their jobs and livelihoods, some have been stranded due to the travel bans imposed in many countries globally, and many experience discrimination due to the possibility, or mistaken belief, that they are possible carriers of the COVID-19 virus.

##### 2.3.1.1.1 Initiatives by Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU)

For many years Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) has been at the forefront of the efforts to protect the rights of migrant workers not only in Bangladesh, but also in the region. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, RMMRU has been working tirelessly with migrants at home and abroad to ensure the protection and wellbeing of migrants and members of their families. “I am well aware of the hard time that everyone is going through at this difficult time. All of our staff members at RMMRU are working almost eighteen hours a day to provide services to migrant households,” reports Dr. Chowdhury Abrar of RMMRU.

The pandemic exposed the current situation of migrants in diaspora and RMMRU is very much alarmed by the increasing number of migrants being stranded and experiencing severe anxiety, starvation,

harassment, and physical assaults due to discrimination, as well as exclusion from health care services. Implications of the pandemic are reflected in the emerging global economic crisis which may result in massive job losses, shrinking of the labour market opportunities, as well as reduction of remittance flow. These factors, according to RMMRU, will not only affect the national economy of Bangladesh but also create transient poverty among remittance dependent households.

Through the RMMRU's hotline and telephone conversations with field staff members, the migrant community was able to express their most urgent needs. To inform the national and global authorities of the hardship of those migrants, RMMRU prepared a Situation Analysis report. RMMRU has proposed short- and long-term measures to address the challenges faced by the migration sector. Short term measures proposed by RMMRU for government adoption included: showing respect to those who lost their lives due to the COVID-19 virus. As part of this, RMMRU as the Secretariat of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) mobilised 16 member organizations of the network and with endorsement of MFA, undertook observance of a minute of silence mourning the death of those who died as a result of the pandemic on 12 April. It also sent an Open Letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh demanding creation of a special fund for migrants. BCSM also submitted a Memorandum to the Secretary General of the United Nations urging his intervention to protect migrants in destination countries.

Other short term measures suggested by RMMRU are: ● creation of a fund for affected migrant workers and their families ● Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) to create emergency funds to be used as humanitarian cash grants to migrant families who are in distress ● convincing governments of destination countries to help stabilize remittance flow ● provision of a more gender-sensitive approach in addressing the virus, and ● to harness the experience of returnee migrants. Long term measures, on the other hand, include: ● provision of a database of returnee migrants, ● provision of guidelines for the treatment of serving migrants during emergency situations, ● securitization of due wages and other benefits for migrant workers being deported, ● awareness creation against irregular migration ● changing education and human resources policy, and ● the fostering of responsibility of regional groups, especially in the post-COVID-19 phase.

#### 2.3.1.1.2 Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK)

Women migrant workers in Bangladesh are already experiencing intersectional struggles from discrimination and inequalities, gender-specific restrictions in migration policies, insecure forms of labour, racism, and xenophobia. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated their condition and women migrants faced loss of jobs and livelihoods, experiencing a lack of social protection and health care as well as increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence at all stages of migration because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK), is an organization promoting the rights of women migrant workers in Bangladesh and abroad, it has stepped up its efforts to help migrants in need, especially women migrant domestic workers. As short-term intervention, BNSK conducted Rapid Response activities through the provision of emergency food and essentials to approximately 500 migrant women. BNSK is also trying to raise awareness among families and communities of migrant workers on how they can protect themselves and their families from the virus, especially for migrant women living in slums (Dhaka and Manikganj district). As mid-term intervention, BNSK conducts livelihood capacity building that seeks to address rehabilitation of livelihoods for the women migrant workers facing loss of income and livelihoods amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, as long-term intervention, BNSK

is conducting advocacy with the ministry of expatriates' welfare and overseas employment for support and services to the migrant workers and for the sustainable reintegration of women migrant workers.

Advocacy is also being pursued with the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Youth, and the Parliamentary Standing Committee to ensure a special fund for women migrant workers to rescue, repatriate and reintegrate the migrant workers into the mainstream economy. There are also hotlines provided for emergency support to Bangladeshi migrant workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. BNSK strived to fulfil their commitments despite facing challenges such as the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to conduct emergency support for migrant workers, as well as lack of institutional funding to attend to the Rapid Response program and to document service delivery.

#### 2.3.1.1.3 WARBE Development Foundation (WARBE-DF)

WARBE-DF has been working with the 5 sub-district level committees and 20 Union Parishad COVID-19 prevention committees of the government to help identify families in rural areas who need food and other relief services and to generate awareness of COVID-19. Upon identifying migrant workers in need, WARBE has helped 320 migrant families with food support and also assisted the government in the continuous monitoring of the conditions of 38 families who are in quarantine.

Information has also been shared with/via the electronic & print media about the safety & security & emergency support of migrants and their family members during the COVID-19 crisis. There are also awareness campaigns organized by WARBE-DF (i.e. the distribution of leaflets) and provided assistance to returnee migrants and their families through over-the-phone consultations (i.e. referring callers to hospitals and responding to their queries concerning migration). WARBE-DF has helped 50 migrants and their family members with health support and referrals to different hospitals. In total, WARBE-DF has managed to reach 3,000 families through their over-the-phone consultations, campaigns, and distribution of leaflets. WARBE-DF also works in lobbying the government to prepare a midterm & long term strategy to support the migrants and their families. They collaborated with other organizations including Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) in drafting a memorandum calling for financial assistance for migrant workers and they have sent an open letter to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh. They further cooperated with a campaign to commemorate the lives of Bangladeshis lost due to COVID-19 called the "One minute of silence," campaign observed on 12 April 2020 in Bangladesh and abroad.

#### 2.3.1.1.4 Association for Community Development (ACD)

The return and immediate rehabilitation of migrants during the crisis is another area of concern. The returnee migrants, especially the women and low-skilled workers, are particularly vulnerable in situations where the virus is spreading together with an absence of economic activities. According to ACD, 4,249 women, including women migrant returnees, faced different forms of domestic violence in April this year during the nationwide. The men and women who have returned from a country of destination during March/April are in a more vulnerable situation as most of them were not paid off by their employers. They may have no work/job in their locality due to lock down. They may have food insecurity and increased domestic violence due to tensions within the family to meet daily needs. Potential migrants (who were about to leave for a job abroad) were prevented from travelling although they had paid a big amount of money to local brokers/recruiting agencies. They are not able to repay their debt and the debt amount, together with interest, is increasing day by day. In this context ACD made crucial intervention in Bangladesh, especially among return migrants and their families.

During lockdown, ACD responded through ‘three-staged’ initiatives. I.e., Preparation, response and recovery. The activities in the ‘preparation stage’ consists of distribution of awareness materials, a 15-day awareness campaign on covid-19 pandemic prevention through loudspeaker announcements, information dissemination through social, visual and print media, person to person interaction with migrant returnees and returnees’ groups (self-help groups), Service mapping for referral and linkage were also performed to provide support and services for children of migrants and their family and training for staff on personal safety. The second stage ‘response’ focussed on service delivery. Mainly, distribution of hygiene material and safety kits, educational materials and financial assistance (cash support) for the vulnerable population, assisting migrants and families to access government services and conducted individual interactions with returnees and potential migrants. The third stage ‘recovery’ focussed on hygiene promotion. They initiated hygiene promotion through ACD’s community-based Socialization Center and organised meetings with government administrators, local elected bodies, schools, religious institutes, district manpower and employment offices, clubs, etc. for sustained awareness on health and hygiene. In terms of numbers of individuals, the organization has reached out to 6, 627 individuals for assistance and 39,776 for awareness campaigns. ACD had worked with indigenous communities, bordering area, slums (including urban slums).

#### 2.3.1.1.5 Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) is MFA’s partner in Bangladesh which focusses on access to justice and the human rights of migrants and refugees. They have made key interventions during the crisis. In view of such, ASK has opened 3 additional helplines along with its one regular helpline and disseminated information widely in order to assist and support as many people as required assistance. ASK has also prepared two Human Rights situation reports whereby the overall human rights situation amid COVID-19 was documented monthly since March 2020, when the virus first hit Bangladesh. ASK is also one of the active members of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration (BCSM), which shared an open letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh appealing for creating a fund for distressed migrants and their families. ASK along with BCSM shared a memorandum with the United Nations General Secretary informing him, amongst others, about the grave consequences that the Bangladeshi migrants were facing in other countries. It mentioned how these countries laid off workers, even those with a valid work permit, and were forcefully deporting and repatriating them back to Bangladesh. It further specified how many of the workers have lost their jobs due to their contracts being terminated and how this had a huge impact in Bangladesh.

ASK is involved actively with other networks in advocacy to ensure the rights of migrants are protected. ASK is a human rights and legal aid organisation. It does not provide any sort of humanitarian assistance in any circumstance. During this time, ASK collected information about 10 returnee migrant workers. Additionally, ASK is conducting situation analysis [still at its drafting stage] of 10 families.



#### 2.3.1.2 India

India announced a nation-wide lockdown and travel ban from March 22, 2020. The unexpected lockdown announcement, loss of employment and inability to return to the homeland continues to cause concern. Due to the lack of access to health services, absence of proper quarantine facilities and provision of COVID-19 test kits, there are major concerns for the Indian migrants in destination countries. Another concern is the panic experienced among Indian workers in the Gulf due to the delay in response by Missions and the unexpected lockdown. The massive demand

for repatriation remains the single most important issue. However, the increase in the rate of Indian return migrants among the COVID-19 affected persons in India had caused anti-migrant feeling among general public. The next set of concerns are meeting the demand for immediate repatriation and the reintegration of workers. As the largest receiver of remittance, India is expecting a steep fall in the remittance and it will definitely have an impact on the economy and the families of migrants. Since most migrant workers are unskilled or semi-skilled workers, reintegration should be assisted by government and civil society organisations. MFA's network in India provides various welfare supports for migrants in destination country and support for migrants upon return to the homeland.

India experiences the largest internal movement for work from less-developed, poorer Indian states to more affluent states. Restricted mobility for internal migrant workers and provision of welfare services in the destination states are major concerns. The sudden announcement of lockdown coupled with the closure of income sources put these workers in difficulty. Migrant workers do not receive enough support from the Indian government as it focuses more on the prevention of the spread of disease than provision of support and livelihood for affected migrant workers. The CSOs in the country are providing them with food and shelter using their vast network, and assisting the governments as well.

#### 2.3.1.2.1 Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS) initiatives

Among the partners, Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS) with its network in the Gulf countries, has supported Indian migrant workers in distress due to the containment measures and financial crisis caused by the pandemic. CIMS has assisted migrant workers to lobby authorities for repatriation. They have co-ordinated efforts to return internal migrants to Kerala where the organisation is based.

Once COVID-19 hit major destination countries of Indian migrant workers, CIMS effectively used its network of individuals and organisations in the Gulf countries to understand the situation. Even before India announced its lockdown, CIMS had provided guidelines for awareness among workers through local social network groups. CIMS has informed NORKA-Roots about the situation in labour camps and the condition of undocumented and documented domestic workers in the Gulf. All calls for clarification and support were directed to NORKA and Central Government helplines for further assistance. The panic created by the slow reaction of Indian embassies to the queries of workers was duly relayed to the Indian missions by our volunteers. As a result, Indian Missions in Saudi Arabia and Oman conducted online meetings with the community volunteers, including CIMS's diaspora actors, to understand the situation at the grassroots level. The distribution of pamphlets and announcements through radio and other online platforms were conducted by networks of CIMS's partners and later Embassies joined forces with them. CIMS also attended to the cases of stranded Indian students in the Philippines and Malaysia with the support of MFA and provided support for the students and their families. CIMS intervened in the concerns of internal migrants as well and coordinated efforts to support the Keralites in other Indian states in terms of medical assistance.

In the next stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the virus spread increased, the CIMS network focused on providing food and shelter to stranded workers in all Middle East countries. Since most Indian workers use medicines from India due to the high costs CODs, CIMS volunteers alerted the government and Indian Mission about the issue and coordinated efforts to bring in medicines through cargo flights. All diaspora actors organised online awareness campaigns and shared the news of solidarity from the governments and society in Kerala to counter misinformation that created panic among expats. The next focus was on undocumented workers and workers who lost their jobs. CIMS networks publicised their situation through social media and local newspapers and received immediate

responses from local authorities and Indian missions. They further assisted seven people with highly vulnerable conditions and provided government support for them with support from MFA. Since Kuwait had already started processing the amnesty, CIMS decided to support a few domestic workers when other diaspora organisations and philanthropists faced difficulties.

In India, CIMS coordinated around 35 academicians, CSOs and trade unions to submit a statement on the current situation of international migrants in CODs along with a set of short-term and long-term suggestions. The statement was submitted to the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry of External Affairs on April 19th. Now CIMS and its network is focusing on data collection about the situation of people in labour camps, the details of Indian COVID-19 patients in the CODs, and migrants access to health services. CIMS has plans to focus on the health conditions of health workers and care workers as well as beginning discussions with government and other agencies in India on the feasibility of various reintegration programs for return migrants. In October, through Lawyers Beyond Borders, CIMS assisted in filing a complaint to the Kerala High Court and finally secured a favorable verdict from the Supreme Court of India for More than 280 labourers - who were fired by the Nasser S Al Hajri Corporation in KSA before being flown home on chartered flights in July. All of the workers had been at the firm for at least five years - some over a decade - and were entitled to a "substantial amount" in outstanding end-of-contract benefits.<sup>121</sup>

#### 2.3.1.2.2 Emigrant Welfare Forum (EWF)

A number of unscrupulous and opportunistic recruiters have been taking advantage of the vulnerable migrant workers that lose their jobs, by trying to engage them in illegal procedures for migration as well as unfair and exploitative agreements to secure employment. To address this, EWF has coordinated with the police department in providing awareness camp of these issues and has undertaken information dissemination using pamphlets to promote legal procedures with recruitment agencies. EWF also coordinated with Judicial Departments for the conduct of financial and legal awareness camps as well as human rights and migrants' rights programs to broaden awareness of the vulnerable migrants and their families of their rights. Through their volunteers EWF initiated a project to help seasonal internal migrant workers through the distribution of food items like rice, pulses and oil with the help of donors and District Labour Officers.

#### 2.3.1.2.3 National Workers Welfare Trust (NWWT)

Because of the complex struggles of migrants in India, NWWT has acted in various ways to help. They mobilized materials and distributed goods and helped people in AP and Hyderabad contact distribution officials. NWWT was able to mobilize help in the early days from its congregation. The congregation was also able to mobilize groceries for 1000 people and has also provided clothes, bed sheets, and soap for 200 people. NWWT also contacted women domestic workers, to find out if they are being provided with proper shelters, or if they are being paid or getting their appropriate salaries. A Joint Action Committee of women and transgender individuals helps link migrants to available services. There is also a women's group that cooks and distributes food for those that are in most need.

In terms of coordination, NWWT is involved with district authorities to find returnees, checking quarantined persons, and helping to monitor their conditions as well as asking people to comply with quarantine policies. NWWT lobbied with the state government to extend welfare to migrants, to help them go home or provide them with basic necessities. In terms of awareness campaigns, NWWT staff

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<sup>121</sup> [Hundreds of Indian workers demand unpaid wages from Saudi construction firm | Reuters](#)

collaborated with the government medical team to inform people about the risks associated with the COVID-19 infection especially for those who have migrated. The organisation urged migrants to follow advice given by the government and to stay at home for at least 20 days to avoid virus contamination. Other assistance provided by the organization include: distribution of 1000 masks to people, distribution of cooked food to daily wage earners as well as providing cooked food for 60 families that depends on daily wage earners alone.



### **2.3.1.3 Pakistan**

The Pakistan government announced lockdown on April 1st in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus and this lockdown was extended twice. However, the number of cases are increasing gradually. Many of the repatriated migrant workers, especially from Gulf countries, have tested positive upon return. Civil society organisations in the country have tried to take care of the well-being of the migrants in the destination country and organise effective repatriation and reintegration to the home country.

#### **2.3.1.3.1 Pakistan Rural Workers Social Welfare Organization' (PRWSWO)**

PRWSWO is involved in activities such as COVID-19 awareness raising, distribution of hygiene kits and ration materials to needy and poor rural families, including migrant workers, during the crisis. PRWSWO volunteers are working hard to counter the spread of misinformation and are organizing relief activities in collaboration with civil society networks and district administration. PRWSWO attempted to use online platforms to co-ordinate efforts and strongly advocated for financial support for return migrants who are in dire need of livelihood support.



### **2.3.1.4 Nepal**

The situation in Nepal is relatively better compared to its neighbouring countries. However, the country also relies on lockdown to contain the virus as well as other mobility restrictions. Nonetheless, the Nepalese government is more concerned about the increasing number of cases being reported among the Nepali workers in destination countries. Apart from the increasing mortality rate among the Nepali workers, discrimination in treatment, inadequate quarantine facilities, non-payment of salaries, wage cuts, lay-offs, loss of jobs are other major concerns. The Nepali government are yet to decide on the possibility of repatriating migrants in distress from destination countries. In this regard, MFA's partners in Nepal have a lot to offer.

#### **2.3.1.4.1 Asian Human Rights and Culture Development Forum (People Forum)**

People Forum has supported migrant workers during the COVID-19 in the following ways: ● Filing a successful case (with interim order) to repatriate and reintegrate migrant workers. ● Organizing central level and provincial level online interaction and consultation for the repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers. (participants 280) ● Preparing a Civil society policy paper on repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers ● Initiating advocacy for repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers. Sending letters to political parties and parliamentarians and media mobilization, which generated huge media coverage, on the Supreme Court order. ● Sharing/ discussing with the international arena the achievement of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) cases ● Providing legal counselling service to 300 migrant workers ● Providing input as a member of the multi-stakeholders

Task Force on COVID-19 and Migration • Pursuing a dialogue with local government for reintegration programs for this fiscal year through its network.

However, People Forum's activities during the crisis was affected by the lack of funds, restrictions in mobility, lack of experience with digital technology and poor access to digital technology in the interior parts of Nepal. Dependents of migrant workers face a tough time due to the absence of remittances. The restricted mobility of workers has even affected the repatriation of mortal remains. It shows that the issues and concerns need to be advocated effectively.

#### 2.3.1.4.2 Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC)

The organization works to facilitate the cases of migrant workers amidst COVID-19. The cases of migrant workers were referred to related embassies in the destination country. Likewise, coordination with Non-Resident Nepali Association was done to provide basic services – food and accommodation to stranded migrants. PNCC assists migrant workers to complete various forms provided by embassies for the purposes of rescue and repatriation. In collaboration with NHRC in Qatar, PNCC is working on the cases involving 'pending salary' of migrant workers. Through an online platform they are also disseminating important information issued by the destination country related to COVID-19. 'Outreach coordinators' in Qatar, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia regularly follow up the cases of migrant workers in close coordination with relevant embassies and other Nepalese diaspora organizations. The lack of accommodation for workers during the crisis was conveyed to the respective embassies by PNCC representatives. PNCC were able to reach out to 1049 workers including 424 distressed migrants.

#### 2.3.1.4.3 Asian Forum for Migrant's Centre (Asian Forum)

Asian Forum has initiated a platform to facilitate the reintegration of the returning migrant workers through a dedicated email and office telephone where an individual can put their queries, concerns and suggestions and the organization can refer them to the relevant agencies or respond to them at the organization's capacity. Asian Forum also contacted migrant workers at destination countries through its network and helped these workers to reach out to the relevant missions or supporting agencies. According to Asian Forum, the lack of guidelines for the response system in destination countries, by the Nepali mission, along with the absence of long term reintegration strategies were the biggest challenges for the workers and CSOs in Nepal.

#### 2.3.1.4.4 Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS) Nepal

Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS) Nepal is an organization run by returnee women migrant workers, working for the rights of women migrant workers and their families and to make migration a safe and dignified work for women migrant workers. They do this through advocacy, capacity building, information dissemination, networking and reintegration programs. AMKAS works closely with MFA to protect the rights of women migrants. To address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, AMKAS Nepal has been actively working to reach out to its vulnerable members in Nepal as well as women migrant workers in CODs. It has been pursuing activities to help them through the process of documenting evidence and using social media to spread awareness on COVID-19. Over a three-month period the organization mobilized returnee migrants to reach out to at least 80 migrants abroad and use their stories for evidence based advocacy to develop relevant reintegration programs for returnee migrants. AMKAS initiated an economic empowerment program for 30-35 jobless returnee women migrants in Kathmandu. AMKAS answers calls from distressed migrant workers through the mobile application 'Shuvayatra'.

According to an AMKAS' informant in UAE, there are around 2500 women waiting to be sent home out of which 135 are either pregnant, or with babies. They are either migrants who have lost their jobs, are undocumented migrants, or migrants who have left their job for fear of COVID-19. An organization informant (Non-Resident Nepali Association Member) from Kuwait informed that there are about 3500 migrants, out of which 50% are women, who for a month have been desperately waiting in shelters to return home. AMKAS Nepal has a shelter with 20 beds which can currently accommodate 10 workers by following social distancing norms. AMKAS Nepal urges the Government of Nepal to understand the severity of the condition of distressed women migrant workers as soon as possible and prepare for future quarantine and isolation activities.

#### 2.3.1.4.5 Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)

WOREC is conducting a survey on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Returnee Migrant women workers in Nepal with the purpose of: • Identifying the choices that returnee migrant women workers have while the country tries to engage in battling COVID-19 with limited resources. • This survey, in particular, will look into government policy and decision making around COVID-19 and how it has affected returnee women migrant workers, including psychological stress that families of women migrant workers suffer when these women have been denied the opportunity to return to Nepal. • The impacts on their livelihood and status in society due to assumptions by the community that migrant workers are transmitters of COVID-19.

WOREC has developed a report to highlight the rights and issues facing women's migrant workers and returnees, and WOREC have submitted this report to the working municipalities in 4 districts i.e. Kailali, Morang, Udaypur and Dang, in coordination with Returnee Women's Migrant Workers (RMW) network to pressurize the federal government to take action immediately. At the same time, WOREC has been providing Psychosocial counselling over the phone via its 28 counsellors. The organization runs 8 Safe Shelters which are open to the victims of gender-based violence including returnee women from India as well as other countries of destination. WOREC has also been supporting local government to collect the data of returnees as well as migrant workers in the countries of destination. WOREC monitored quarantine situations and has recommended local governments to make quarantine gender friendly/responsive. Three cases reported to the organization concerning migrant domestic workers have been submitted to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

The efforts by Civil societies to support the migrants in distress during the crisis have been invaluable but the Nepali government is yet to develop a comprehensive strategy to specifically address the needs of migrants. MFA partner 'POURAKHI' is in frequent communications with UN agencies and other International organisations for support of vulnerable migrants from Nepal. The announcement of possible repatriation by the Nepali government in the coming days and months poses more challenges for civil society and the government of Nepal. It requires tremendous co-ordination and determination to handle the massive repatriation process with limited resources.



#### 2.3.1.5 Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's response to the virus is recognised as one of the best in the world, at least among South Asian countries. Sri Lanka is the only country in the South Asian region which did not adopt lockdown strategies to mitigate the virus. However, the country's response to the request for repatriation from Sri Lankan workers abroad was

criticised. The country has a large number of migrant workers overseas as a proportion of its overall population. Our partners in Sri Lanka assisted government initiatives such as ‘Contact Sri Lanka’ and spread awareness campaigns among workers in the initial stages of infection. Later on they became involved in advocacy and networking to ensure the well-being of Sri Lankans living in destination countries.

#### 2.3.1.5.1 Migrant Services Center (MSC)

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, return and reintegration of affected migrant workers has been one of the biggest challenges today and of a large concern for organizations dealing with the welfare of migrants and migrant workers, like Migrant Services Center (MSC). The significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment of migrant workers means that MSC has already started providing training to returnee migrant workers and their families on Entrepreneurship to help them establish their own income stream. However, intervention is required from all levels of government and authorities. MSC has also improved its communication channels for migrant workers needing help. There is an unofficial hotline that uses a mobile phone from a council member of MSC of NWC. MSC has provided educational awareness through digital modes on how to take precautionary measures to stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic and MSC has helped to share contact details of Sri Lankan mission offices in countries of destination.

#### 2.3.1.5.2 Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM)

Another partner in Sri Lanka, Action Network for Migrant Workers (ACTFORM) not only focused on the repatriation and reintegration of migrants, but also on the welfare of migrant families in the country. Migrant families who solely depend on the money sent from abroad by their family member employed abroad have been denied government relief packages because of ‘being a migrant family’. There are many migrant families who, prior to the respective family member secures employment abroad, had been considered below poverty line and therefore was entitled for government’s social welfare facility called ‘Samurdhi’ under which the family received a monthly food ration. However, with the departure of the family member for employment abroad the Social Welfare benefit is withdrawn from these families. These families have been seriously affected due to deprivation of such entitlement by the government. In this context, ACTFORM assisted the families by providing direct and indirect assistance and advocated for the welfare of migrants at the Ministry of Labour.

As a network of community-based organizations working in 13 districts out of 25, they have been in touch with the migrant families through our network members for their welfare. The major concern was the poor access to remote areas in the country due to lockdown and curfew. While direct assistance was not possible, ACTFORM made efforts through the relevant government officials (Development Officers) to make sure these families are looked after. Based on the information provided by the network leaders, ACTFORM advocated with relevant government authorities including the Minister of Labour for immediate intervention for the welfare of migrant workers and their families and submitted a policy document for the minister. ACTFORM raised approximately USD 3000 for any kind of intervention. Through 18 community-based organizations, ACTFORM were able to support 170 individuals and family members during the crisis. The major support was in the form of food rations. Apart from that, their network members were supported with mobile communication top-ups to maintain communication with affected migrant workers and families.

### 2.3.1.5.3 Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB) Sri Lanka

LBB has organised various webinars on topics varying from human rights of migrants, women migrant rights, to repatriation and reintegration of workers. Through webinars they have identified a number of key concerns. LBB managed to conduct cross country discussions on reintegration of migrants in association with the solidarity centre. LBB persuaded Parliamentarians to appeal to the government to provide financial assistance to returnees and their families who have suffered without access to their daily livelihoods and income. A group of Sri Lankan migration advocates/ organizations with the support of LBB came together to share a statement of recommendations on migrant workers, returnees and families of migrant workers with Sri Lankan government authorities.



### 2.3.1.6 Maldives

The situation in the Maldives worsened from March. The highly populated island nation with limited resources found it difficult to deal with the spread of the COVID-19 virus especially in the dormitories of migrant workers. By the discretionary powers vested in the Minister of Health by Section 33 of the 7/2012 Public Health Act the Minister declared a State of Public Health Emergency for a period of 30 days from 12th March 2020 this was later extended. Since all government offices have been closed since 19th March 2020 there is difficulty in obtaining services from these offices. Though there are ways to submit letters and documents online, this is difficult for many migrant workers who may not be aware or may not have access to the internet.

#### 2.3.1.6.1 Initiatives by Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB)

Our partner in the Maldives, Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB), is an organization with its main focus on providing free legal aid to vulnerable and marginalized communities, including migrant workers. The organization is lobbying the government to take necessary actions to safeguard the rights of these communities. LBB's call center operates for 24 hours a day supporting people, including migrant workers, with legal advice and legal aid during this pandemic. They give legal advice on how to proceed with claims and how to register with the job center (a government initiative to provide relief to workers who lose their jobs). Although the organization was running solely on donations and didn't have proper funding during this difficult time, they provided online services to support people in need.



### 2.3.1.7 The Philippines

Migrant families are deeply affected by the crisis since they depend largely on the monthly remittances, sent by their OFW loved ones, for their day to day needs for food, school allowance, tuition for private schools, monthly bills for utilities (water, electricity, telephone, internet), house rent/ amortization, medicines etc. The lockdown affected the flow of income and survival after two months of lockdown, especially in National Capital region and Luzon, is extremely difficult for these families.

#### 2.3.1.7.1 Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA)

Under a work-from-home mode of operation, since March 15, 2020, CMA has made sure that they are available and accessible, online and via phone, to migrants and their families for their queries, request for information and assistance. Their major initiatives include:

- Facilitating assistance to both land-based and sea-based distressed migrants.

- Assisting migrants and groups of workers who are stranded during the crisis with various concerns such as long hours of work, non-payment of wages, refusal to issue exit visas, maltreatment (physical, verbal, psychological/emotional), denial of food, confiscation of mobile phone etc.
- Facilitating issuance of food packs and assistance to migrant families in the communities in Metro Manila.
- CMA partners with partner migrant organizations and LGUs in attending to cases of distressed migrants.
- Psychosocial interventions and tele consultations by linking up with partner groups like Medical Action Group and through facilitation of CMA's social worker intern.
- Engaging and communicating with migrants and their families through social media through CMA Facebook page.
- Policy advocacy and public information dissemination through a series of webinars.
- CMA participated in UNFPA's rapid gender assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in various sectors in the Philippines and they were in charge of migrant worker respondents (both returned and onsite).
- Assisting partner and local government units in developing an action plan in response to the pandemic. One of the proposals that CMA pioneered is the creation of an online platform to easily identify where the migrants are, their needs and immediate intervention necessary.

For CMA, the transition from offline to online was difficult, at least in the initial days of lockdown. Responding to cases of distressed migrants has been delayed because of lockdowns in countries of destination and Missions prioritized 'COVID-19-related' cases. Nonetheless, CMA has been able to help around 1000 cases and among those cases 700 cases have been sea-based cases and 129 have been COVID-19 related. Apart from that CMA has provided direct benefits such as food packets and shelter for stranded OFWs.

#### 2.3.1.7.2 Kanlungan

MFA members in the Philippines have had to deal with the impact of lockdown among migrant families and migrants and the troubles faced by workers in the destination countries, especially in the Gulf countries due to mobility restrictions. A survey conducted by Kanlungan reports that migrant communities in Aringay (70) and Sudipen (40) and the families left behind are facing various challenges for their livelihood and income during the crisis. Moreover, the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) sent text messages to volunteers about the difficulties they face in destination countries and expressed their desire to return home.

Kanlungan has provided information dissemination regarding government services and assistance to migrant workers affected by COVID-19. Most of their intervention is done online. They are monitoring complaints of returned migrants and are currently handling cases (2 repatriation cases in Qatar, 1 repatriation case in Oman, 8 requests for assistance in Mali, 1 Seafarer for assistance quarantine, 1 case of overwork in Hong Kong, 5 cases of repatriation in Qatar, 3 are still with the Philippines Overseas Labour Office (POLO) Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and two are now back home undergoing 14 day mandatory quarantine in Makati). Despite challenges such as lack of mobility and lack of funds to provide the necessary assistance, Kanlungan is determined to provide help and assistance to those that are in need.

#### 2.3.1.7.3 Batis Center

Like Kanlungan, Batis Center is another partner of MFA in the Philippines which provides services for the migrants, especially returnees. A significant number of Batis Center for Women's clients/partners (as member of Batis AWARE) belong to the low-income group. Though some of them may have a source of income, (mostly backyard enterprises,) or were precariously employed before the enhanced community quarantine, many of them now find themselves without a regular source of income. At the same time, they are not guaranteed recipients of the government's social amelioration program. Thus, many of the returned women migrants and their families need assistance.

At present, Batis Center for Women through the resource mobilization initiative of Batis - AWARE is distributing cash assistance to women migrants and their families. This is to augment whatever small savings, or reduced income, they may have as well as the assistance from the government, if and when it is provided for them. They have reached out to approximately 20 returned women migrants (or around 80 individuals, including members of their families). And the cost, or fund of, the organization used to deliver initiatives are within the range of US\$3,000 - US\$4,000.

Due to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Batis Center for Women has had to adopt a work from home arrangement. This means the assistance extended needs to be in cash so it can be sent to the women and their families via local money transfer agencies to enable them to purchase the goods necessary for their everyday needs. Batis Center also coordinates repatriation assistance with relevant government agencies to returning clients from Japan within the work from home arrangement.

#### 2.3.1.7.4 KAKAMMPI

'KAKAMMPI', an organisation of Overseas Filipino workers, migrant returnees and their families made crucial intervention through its media and advocacy campaigns. They relied on online media and radio stations to run worldwide campaigns for the workers. KAKAMMPI used radio stations to disseminate information. The organisation was interviewed by a radio based in Saudi Arabia, (Ofwaah TeleRadio/Hello Philippines, Hello World,) to discuss and share the activities by KAKAMMPI for OFW women workers in Saudi Arabia. They aired the campaign 'Babaeng Migrante, May Kakampi Ka!' and did on-air counselling and interviewed different personalities from the government sector during the program (PhilHealth, Pag-IBIG, SSS, NAPC).

Using the immense possibilities of media, KAKAMMPI provides counselling to women, OFWs locally and abroad. The organization has also done solicitation for distribution of relief food packages and medicines to some OFW returnees not listed as beneficiaries of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). Regarding advocacy, KAKAMMPI was involved in the review process of various House Bills before being passed, in coordination and partnership with the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) for the Formal Labor Migrant Workers Sector, KAKAMMPI and NAPC submitted the suggestions and proposals on recruitment, working condition and social protection of migrants during the COVID-19 crisis to Malacañang and other government institutions.

#### 2.3.1.7.5 Unlad Kabayan

Unlad Kabayan is another crucial partner in the country who made notable and effective interventions as a civil society organisation. They have supported the containment activities of the government and provided relief for the migrant worker's families and returnee migrants. Amid the struggles to earn income in times of COVID-19 pandemic, Unlad Kabayan through Brace Women's livelihood supports home gardening, backyard livestock growing and livelihood activities done by women in Davao. Large number of OFWs have lost jobs and are unable to send remittances to their families in the past months.

The activities by Unlad Kabayan provide food for the affected household of migrant workers and contribute to the food supply chain. They also provide financial aid to support the workers in the coir factory, which is run by migrants, that has been affected badly by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 2.3.1.7.6 Atikha

In response to the pandemic and embracing the new normal, the organization extended their programs and services to migrants and their families through Virtual and Online Education through PinoyWISE iTV. Once a week, a 30- 45-minute program, in talk show format, via zoom conference is broadcast. It features videos of OFWs, families, and partners in different areas and helps bridge the information gap of government agencies involved in migration and features OWWA, DOLE, local government, and other relevant agencies programs and services. It features inspiring OFW stories, initiatives on the ground, OFW and families' coping strategies, best practices, and stories of OFWs, families, or OFW organizations and individuals creating an impact during the pandemic.

There are also information drives done through PinoyWISE FB Fan Page: an open page that can be accessed by OFWs and families. It publishes PinoyWISE iTV episodes, updates from Atikha, national government, local government, banks, cooperatives, and other migration and development partners. There is also Virtual organizing of OFWs and families through PinoyWISE regional and country Closed Group Facebook Page. Web-based and mobile-based training on Family and Income Management is also done through the PinoyWISE Mobile App. The organization was able to reach out to about 20,000 OFW and families in a month through PinoyWISE iTV reaches and coordinated with around 1,500 stranded OFWs.

Atikha also mobilizes technical and financial resources to assist the repatriated OFWs by leading the convening of the Committee on Migration and Development at the regional level, the database of repatriated OFWs and OFW enterprises. Atikha initiated the Balikabayanihan Campaign, a resource mobilization campaign via "Adopt an OFW," or "Adopt an OFW Cooperative," in partnership with CFO, NEDA, OWWA-NRCO, and TESDA. Atikha has also been in close coordination with the national government agencies and local government units in assisting stranded migrants. The organization initiated the protocol for Local Government Units in Region 4a in responding to repatriated OFWs. In some regions and partner provinces, Atikha is working with the Committee on Migration and Development in implementing reintegration programs and services.



#### 2.3.1.8 *Malaysia*

The pandemic reached Malaysia in January. Even though the number of cases remained low, the massive population of immigrants, and Malay seasonal workers in Singapore, was a concern in the country. Similarly, **in May**, 586 undocumented migrants and refugees in Malaysia were rounded up and taken to detention buildings. The raid took place in three buildings in Kuala Lumpur that house an estimated 9,000 migrant workers, primarily from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Malaysian authorities said they were trying to contain the spread of the coronavirus, and to prevent migrant workers from moving freely making it difficult to track and contact trace if needed. On 22 March Malaysia's defence minister called on undocumented migrant workers to get tested, and promised that their legal status

would not be checked, and no action would be taken if they were not documented. However, the government appears to have done a U-turn and decided to raid the dorms.<sup>122</sup>

#### 2.3.1.8.1 Makan4Migrants Program

In response to migrants losing their source of income, due to the Movement Confinement Order, (MCO) which was enforced from 18 Mar 2020, MFA's partner in Malaysia, 'Our Journey' took the initiative to reinvent itself from an advocacy organisation to that of a humanitarian aid provider. They initiated a program called #Makan4Migrants (which translates to Food for Migrants) on 26 March 2020. The program was essentially to address the immediate concerns of the migrants ie access to food (geographically and financially). Bar Council and Migrants, Refugees and Immigration Affairs Committee were supporting partners who were available to provide any legal advice if it was needed. To begin the program, Our Journey raised funds through WeLoveWeCareWeShare and received donations from the public for the 1st month. As #Makan4Migrants program began receiving good support, private entities approached Our Journey to financially support the program on an ongoing basis. Thereafter a request for public donations was discontinued. The initiative channels most of the monetary resources into purchasing the provisions for the migrant workers. The delivery volunteers are paid a small stipend for their petrol cost to cover their 15 – 20 daily deliveries.

Initially, Makan4Migrants identified the migrants who are in dire need of assistance with of help of a few migrant associations such as PERTIM - an Indonesian migrant community organisation, AMMPO – a Filipino migrant community organisation and Bhalobashi Bangladesh - a Bangladesh migrant Community and a few community leaders. They assisted in compiling a list of migrant communities. The program also works closely with embassies to identify communities that require assistance. The program funds individuals and organisations in Ipoh, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak to serve the migrant communities in their locations and also funds individuals in Klang Valley who provide help for the migrants in their localities.

The initiative provides dry provisions because frequently the migrants being supported do not have refrigerators to keep cooked food or fresh food (most buy vegetable and meat on a daily basis). The program takes into account the cultural preference of the migrants and distributes 6 items to each person (costing between RM55 - 60 per person). Provisions are carefully divided to ensure the migrants and their families receive equal and adequate provisions for a month from the date of delivery. To ensure that the MCO is not violated a total of 10 persons work on the ground at any one time. People were mobilised to ensure the 10 km local MCO restriction was adhered to. A team of five people collate and finalise the list for distribution. The initiative has engaged a wholesaler to facilitate bulk purchases and delivery to the migrants. When there was no volunteer to deliver the food aid in a particular locality, migrants were asked to find a shop that would agree to online payments and delivery of items to the migrants. Makan4Migrant also provides milk for children below the age of 6, upon request from parents and it has allocated a 3-months milk program for each migrant child identified.

Difficulties in paying the accommodation for rentals remains an important concern for the migrants. The project allocated a budget to pay for the rental of high needs migrants for the months of March, April and May. Rentals were paid directly to the house owners with proof of bank-ins and receipts. Migrants were asked to negotiate with the following suggestions prior to paying the rental: ● To defer payment for a reasonable time. ● Reduction/partial payment of rental to be paid. ● Sharing of house with other migrants to share the rental cost. From 27 March 2020 to date, the initiative has provided 1-month supply of provisions to about 5500 South East Asians (Indonesians, Filipinos, Burmese,

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<sup>122</sup> <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepali-workers-in-malaysia-fear-covid-19-crackdown/>

Vietnamese, Cambodians) and South Asian (Nepalis, Sri Lankans, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Pahang, Ipoh, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak; the initiative has provided milk for 80 Indonesian and Filipino children; and April and May rental payments for 9 migrants.



### **2.3.1.9 Singapore**

After successfully containing COVID-19 cases in February and March, the situation in Singapore took a dramatic turn for the worse in April. Huge numbers of migrant workers living in high-density dormitories became infected. The city state was locked down starting on 7 April, and many dormitories with infection clusters were put under quarantine. By 17 May 2020, Singapore had recorded 28,038 infections, of which over 90% were migrant workers from the dormitories. Out of about 999,000 Work Permit holders in Singapore (which we treat as synonymous with low-wage migrant workers) about 262,000 are domestic workers. Of the remaining 737,000 non-domestic workers, about 323,000 (44%) live in dormitories. The infections are concentrated amongst these 323,000 dormitory residents. Foreign domestic workers and low-wage migrant workers outside of dormitories have low infection rates similar to the general Singaporean population.

#### **2.3.1.9.1 Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2)**

When the lockdown was ordered and the dormitories began to be quarantined, TWC2 swiftly changed their mode of operations and shifted their focus. Operationally, they moved to online consulting, and their focus shifted to ensuring that workers stuck in dormitories had the mobile data to remain in contact with TWC2 and their families, as well as providing other forms of support to those no longer able to leave their places of residence. The phone top-up program benefitted about 36,800 workers. As of 17 May 2020, TWC2 has spent nearly \$380,000 (approx. US\$268,000). They are about to embark on the second wave of top-ups and are expecting to spend another \$300,000 (US\$211,000) to benefit 30,000 workers, some of which may overlap with the first wave. Simultaneously, TWC2 remained attentive to the needs of Special Pass holders – i.e. those workers who had lost their jobs and filed salary or injury claims and were now awaiting resolution of their claims. Many of them had been evicted from their dormitories with their previous employers effectively abandoning them. Pre-COVID-19, these were TWC2's main clients. With the lockdown, claims resolution processes were suspended, and these workers were left in limbo with neither income, accommodation nor any form of support. TWC2 focusses on various service provision and advocacy during the period of crisis. In the second week of May 2020, TWC2 gave rent money to about 280 workers, spending about \$85,000 (US\$60,000). The beneficiaries were the Special Pass workers who did not have employer-paid housing.

TWC2's free meals program continues even during the lockdown, under an exemption order. Every day volunteers serve about 100 – 150 breakfasts and 200 – 300 dinners. Each worker gets a choice of meat, a vegetable dish, dahl and rice. It is often supplemented with fruits, for which TWC2 has more than enough donors. This continuing program costs about \$30,000 a month (US\$21,000). TWC2 has a Small Essential Needs team (SEN) with a budget of \$50,000 (US\$35,000) which takes in requests from workers for essential items which, workers quarantined in dorms or hospitals can no longer go out to get. TWC2 has been distributing phone chargers, toiletries, clothing (especially to men taken to hospital when they are prohibited from wearing their contaminated clothing) and food items. This team has also been getting prescription refills for men who were injured in workplace accidents pre-COVID-19, and are still recovering. TWC2 continues to ensure medical treatment for workers, helping them negotiate with hospitals for early appointment dates despite the focus now being on COVID-19 needs. They recently arranged two surgery dates for a worker suffering from kidney stones; TWC2 also had to

strongly advocate to the authorities not to repatriate him before he has recovered from the surgery. TWC2 will be paying for the surgery which is expected to amount to about \$14,000 (US\$9,900).

TWC2 launched a publicity campaign to disseminate information about their WhatsApp consultation channels. They also organised a team of volunteers to man the hotlines during the weekends when there was a surge of enquiries coming in. By mid-May however, the number of enquiries was petering out and TWC2 may soon discontinue the weekend service. Many workers had questions regarding what their salary entitlements were under quarantine situations. Other workers requested help in getting essential items they could no longer get for themselves after being quarantined. To cope with the number of enquiries, TWC2 made audio clips in Tamil and Bengali of the standard advisories that were being given out, to avoid having to repeat the same answers to several workers. These audio advisories were well received and often shared among the workers.

Throughout this period, TWC2 media efforts have been intense. On average there are 2 to 4 media enquiries a day needing someone to give either background interviews or on-record Skype and Zoom interviews. TWC2 has worked with Al Jazeera, Asahi TV, New York Times, AP, AFP, Thomson Reuters, Los Angeles Times, DW.com, Swiss Radio, Hindustan Times, Rappler, China Global, BBC, South China Morning Post, Huffington Post etc. Journalists have been introduced to workers confined to dorms to enable the journalists to conduct further interviews. One paper that they published on their website after one of the webinars garnered 65,000 views in two weeks -- for an advocacy-type article 65,000 is considered an exceptionally high readership. As intended, it broadened the conversation from just COVID-19 and dormitories to the larger issue of the way Singapore treats foreign workers and why policies need to change.

#### 2.3.1.9.2 Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME)

HOME, running a shelter for abused and run-away migrant workers in Singapore, has stepped up outreach efforts to workers outside of dormitories and provided assistance such as phone top ups, food, case work and legal advice. So far, HOME has assisted almost 1000 workers affected by the pandemic. HOME is providing financial emergency assistance to migrant workers for immediate basic needs like food, shelter, medical or transport expenses and phone top-up. The organization also provides additional medical and counselling assistance to shelter residents as well as outreach to workers living in smaller accommodations found on the open market and providing them supplies such as masks and sanitisers. HOME is extending its existing essential telephone hotline to any migrant worker that reaches out for help and advice and providing complex case management to migrant workers (to both MDWs and non-domestic workers). They also help in providing mediation services to MDWs for issues faced with their employers or agents. For advocacy, HOME is responding to government and media requests for statements and information on migrant workers, HOME is also proactively engaging in advocacy work with relevant authorities using our case work experience and data to strengthen legal systems and advocating for the rights of 1.2 million migrant workers in Singapore.



#### 2.3.1.10 Indonesia

In Indonesia, the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a time when there was a residual division of society due to the presidential election. There was a battle of community groups, between supporters of Jokowi and supporters of Anies Baswedan, the Governor of DKI Jakarta again strengthened his position. The Governor of DKI Jakarta first imposed a lockdown and then followed that measure with the enactment of a Large-Scale Social Restriction through the Government Regulation in lieu of Law. The policy has had a major

impact on the economy in terms of a decline in economic growth because it limits mobility and limits gatherings of people who still use the method of buying and selling directly rather than online trading.

#### 2.3.1.10.1 Serikat Buruh Migrant Indonesia (SBMI)

On March 20, 2020, the Ministry of Manpower imposed a temporary closure of the placement process for Indonesian migrant workers to all destination countries. Prospective migrant workers who have already been processed at the Placement Agency were forced to return home and bear the burden of additional costs in the form of a security deposit of IDR 10-20 million or land certificate. Our partner SBMI was vocal on the protection of migrant rights from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. Based on government mitigation strategies, Serikat Buruh Migrant Indonesia (SBMI) initiated measures to help people in need. The organization has provided online tips on the prevention of COVID-19 infection. They have also helped in distributing masks, spraying disinfectants at home and abroad. This activity was carried out in Lampung, Sumatra, Jakarta, West Java (Cirebon and Indoramayu), Central Java (Wonosobo) and East Java (Malang, Bojonegoro, Tulung Agung). Overseas masking is carried out in Hong Kong, while for Singapore and Taiwan are constrained by a policy of prohibiting shipping by airlines, the mask was finally distributed to the people in Malang Regency.

#### 2.3.1.10.2 Jarnas Pekabumi

Jarnas Pekabumi is partnering with the Social Affairs Agency of Semarang Regency and the Getasan sub-district officials in activities such as: disinfection of villages, information dissemination to the community to better maintain cleanliness, awareness among people, spreading information on the importance of staying at home and sharing the important message of obeying Indonesian government policy on social and physical distancing to avoid and prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus. The organization also helps through making non-medical masks and involves migrant families in this process. In addition, the organization provides an empowerment activity, in which they have invited migrant families to distribute masks; to help them contribute to the efforts against COVID-19.

#### 2.3.1.10.3 Migrant Care

Migrant Care acted as bridge between workers and government agencies and helped them to access government services. Migrant Care has collected the data of migrant workers in distress, especially from Malaysia. With the support of the Migrant Care Malaysian team, Migrant Care distributed food for the Indonesian workers in both Malaysia and Indonesia. Apart from food distribution, they distributed protective masks to the migrant communities both at the departure point and destination country. So far, Migrant Care has reached out to approximately 2000 migrant workers.

#### 2.3.1.10.4 Solidaritas Perempuan

All MFA partners in Indonesia were keen on dealing with the increasing vulnerability among women migrants when the virus outbreak occurred. Solidaritas Perempuan, MFA partner from Indonesia analysed the health, social, economic and political impact of the virus outbreak on women migrants using their network and experience from the grassroots. Their data shows that the incidence of domestic violence is frequent during the pandemic and identified that the voice and decision-making capacity of women is being curtailed like never before during the pandemic responses by government and civil society. Solidaritas Perempuan further observed that there are no protocols on the local level to govern the return migrants during COVID-19 crisis. Regardless of the current restrictions on operations, Solidaritas Perempuan, together with their 12 communities focus on strengthening women, especially

farmers/peasants, fisherfolks, and migrant workers, by developing and establishing networks to support women groups to deal with the crisis at the village and urban areas of Jakarta.

The major activities of the organization include strengthening women through various ways such as distributing materials containing information related to COVID-19, namely prevention of virus transmission, people's rights in emergency situation, and the rights in the situation of quarantine/social restrictions, complaint mechanisms, and contacts for case assistance. Another way is strengthening women's awareness to information related to their rights in facing COVID-19, through intensive communication and coordination (telephone, text message and other social media platform). There is also logistic distribution done based on the needs of women at the grassroots and community (mask, soap, food, etc.). Lastly, Solidaritas Perempuan started to develop food security system in the village level, including building of rural-urban food networks/connections.



### **2.3.1.11 Cambodia**

#### **2.3.1.11.1 Initiatives of Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD)**

In 2020, Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD) has three projects that focus on garment factories workers and women entertainment workers in 11 provinces, most of them are internal migrants. In February the royal government issued a letter from the Ministry of Tourism in Cambodia to close down the entertainment service. Some garment factories also closed down due to the lack of material and orders from buyers. These policies are still in force until the COVID-19 crisis improves. All of the entertainment services are under the strict control of the authorities and sanitisation measures and social distancing was practiced by the whole country. Most of the garment workers and entertainment workers returned to their homeland. To help reduce infections by COVID-19, CWPD has provided virtual online outreach (through telephone, and Facebook providing key prevention messages from the Ministry of Health and WHO to prevent COVID-19).

#### **2.3.1.11.2 Initiatives of Legal Support for Women and Children (LSWC)**

In Cambodia, the family of migrant workers largely rely on remittances sent by the migrants and these people were deeply affected by the crisis. The CSOs in Cambodia observed that food shortage, lost income generation, loss of job and debt remains the critical issues among Cambodian returnees and their families members. While migrants who were stranded at destination countries such as Malaysia and Thailand also faced food shortage, unfair dismissal and loss of income. Another partner in Cambodia, Legal Support for Women and Children (LSWC) attempted to tackle these issues in various capacities.

LSCW set up a referral system for migrant workers to familiarize them with various services, monitor the situation of migrants, share information on policies in Cambodia and destination countries and to distribute emergency relief. So far, LSCW has been able to reach out to 20 individuals for emergency relief support and 100 workers have been guided to other available support services. LSWC has focused on short term service provision during the COVID-19 crisis due to the shortage of financial support. They are also trying to plan programs and budget, with the support of donors, to deal with the long-term issues such as livelihood support and reintegration.



### **2.3.1.12 Thailand**

Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, the overwhelming situation in Thailand was the shortage of food and personal protective equipment. However, now that the

pandemic has come somewhat under control, leading to some relaxation of the containment measures, the persistence of unemployment and economic stagnation has brought a range of new challenges to migrant workers.

Generally, the need for food is no longer prioritized as there are more people and groups giving away food. In Chiang Mai, **Migrant Assistance Program (MAP)** noticed that at the start of the outbreak, migrant workers would try to buy cheap masks and reuse them, but more recently masks have been considered luxury items given their situation of income shortage. MFA partner in Thailand, Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) received deliveries of masks and hand sanitizers around the beginning of May and that was when they started to give them to the workers. Another concern for migrant workers is the difficulty in paying rent. Those who are single have often moved to share one room with more people. It was found that up to six people, (not from the same family,) were living in one room to reduce costs. Some of them asked for support to pay the rent instead of receiving food.

Recently, with the relaxation of the emergency decree, it is reported that workers in Chiang Mai have started to go back to work, but not regularly, and they do not earn as much as they used to. Those who are still unemployed have to go out and search for donated food. There was no report of migrant workers with COVID-19 symptoms from HRDF's outreach when distributing food parcels. It was observed that the migrant workers sustained stress and sleep deprivation due to uncertainty about the future. Many women expressed their desire to go back to Myanmar. However, in Chiang Mai, only a small percentage of the workers wanted to leave as they had been living in Chiang Mai for such a long time.

#### 2.3.1.12.1 Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF)

- **Access to Social Security entitlements:** In Mae Sot, most workers are workers under Section 64, so most of them were not registered under the Social security system. However, recently, HRDF sent a letter to the Social Security Office in Tak to inquire about Section 64 and social security entitlements. They confirmed that those with border employment can be registered for social security. HRDF will explore how it can help the workers to make claims. In Chiang Mai, it is estimated by the team that only 10 percent of migrant workers who are entitled to social security are actually registered to the fund by their employers. HRDF have helped some workers to claim their benefits of unemployment and for job suspension and found a number of challenges that hindered the workers' access.

Firstly, online registration was not possible for migrant workers as it was only available in Thai. To track their applications, they were required to go in person to the office and to queue for hours. Now it is possible to track the application online. However, if the result shows that they are not eligible, they are still required to go to the office to examine the reasons and how to proceed to appeal. There has been a case concerning workers who are employed by the same employer where only a small number have received the benefits whilst the rest have been rejected without clear reasons. There was also a synchronization issue between banks and the social security office, which resulted in further delay of disbursement of benefits.

- **Stranded migrants and repatriation:** The persistent unemployment situation among migrant workers has led to many attempting to return to their country of origin. HRDF has found several cases, particularly of Myanmar migrant workers, who were left stranded enroute by their buses which were hired to the Myawaddy- Mae Sot border.

HRDF worked with the Tak Governor's team to safely repatriate these stranded workers. With this collaboration, HRDF has helped up to 150 stranded migrant workers to cross the border to Myanmar

safely. The assistance HRDF provided included covering their temporary lodging and coordinating with CTUM in Myawaddy to lobby their local authorities to unofficially receive the workers. Not until 23 May 2020, did the first set of Myanmar migrant workers, who registered online with the embassy to show their intention to go back, get transportation to the border. The new system remains very exclusive and can only accommodate a small number of workers per day. It does not include undocumented migrant workers. Those who cannot register online are required to go to the embassy in Bangkok.

- **Direct Assistance:** HRDF helps provide masks, hand sanitizers, and food to many migrants. Food is subject to each local team deciding what they consider suitable for distribution for the communities. For example, MAP decided to distribute sacks of rice only following their quick survey on what the workers and their family would need most. HRDF, Mae Sot office, gave drinking water to some communities which do not have access to clean water. Others gave canned food and some fresh food as well. Along with those items, HRDF also distributes information briefs about COVID-19 and other existing brochures relevant to migrant workers' rights.
- **Cross provincial assistance:** HRDF have targeted the following provinces: In the North, Chiang Mai and Lum Phun provinces. Workers there are mainly in tourism and hospitality, construction, agriculture and domestic work. In the West, HRDF have targeted Tak and Kanchanaburi provinces. Workers there are mainly in factories and agriculture. In the central areas, HRDF has targeted the Ratchathewi district in Bangkok, Samut Sakorn, Samut Prakarn, and Pathum Thani. Migrants here are mostly in manufacturing and the services sectors. In the South HRDF has targetted Pang-nga, Surat Thani and Pattani. Workers there are mainly in hospitality and tourism, working in small shops, fisheries and seafood-processing factories.

HRDF's Mae Sot team has joined together with other grassroots organizations including FAR and Myanmar Migrant Network in Bangkok (MMNB) which also provide legal aid for case referral during the pandemic time. HRDF pooled resources and referred cases to the government-run Migrant Workers Assistance Center (MWAC) when possible. Examples of those in need were cases of hundreds of garment workers in Nonthaburi who were suddenly terminated and workers in Samut Prakarn who were cheated by their brokers who promised to complete their work permit extension process. HRDF estimates that each organization helped around 1,200 individual migrant workers and their family members. It was later on confirmed that the number that HRDF alone (not including HRDF partners) supported is 1,976 migrant workers and their family members. MAP distributed goods to around 400 households with an average of 2-3 members in each household. MWG has estimated the number of people receiving support parcels to be 1,400. In total, HRDF have reached out to at least 3,600 people.



### **2.3.1.13 Taiwan**

The Taiwanese government has been very strict in implementing safety measures to avoid spreading the virus and it has been commended by the international community for the efforts taken by the government. Most of the companies and brokers imposed strict restriction on the mobility of migrant workers. The CSOs in the country supported the government by following clearly defined safety measures and by disseminating information among the vulnerable population in the country.

### 2.3.1.13.1 Hsinchu Migrants and Immigrants Services Centre (HMISC)

On March 6th, 2020 HMISC, together with Migrant Empowerment Network in Taiwan, (MENT) organized a press conference to address key issues. We demanded that the Ministry of Labour (MOL) and National Immigration Affairs (NIA) provide fair treatment for the migrant workers. We made demands to the government of Taiwan to repatriate the workers, not to impose penalties on them and requested that the government legalize their status from undocumented to legal worker. On March 20th, 2020 the National Immigration Affairs (NIA) published and announced the amnesty for undocumented migrant workers due to COVID-19 pandemic. This became effective from April 1 to June 30, 2020 with the following clauses; • Undocumented workers can only pay for NT\$ 2,000. (Before NT\$10,000) • No detention. • No ban in Taiwan means migrants can come back to Taiwan again to work. After the designated period if the migrant worker is arrested, they will receive the full penalty prescribed by the law

HMISC had a couple of meetings with the Ministry of Labour regarding the NIA announcement> We found out that the NIA announcement for the runaway workers Amnesty misleads the undocumented **workers because the labor standard law is the same.** The announcement that the undocumented migrant workers cannot return to Taiwan using their working visa is contradicted with the NIA announcement that they can return to work. HMISC has plans to conduct regular press conferences in the coming weeks to keep the government accountable on migrant issues. Currently, HMISC are sheltering eight legal Vietnamese men whose labour contract is overdue due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to mobility restrictions, they cannot fly back to Vietnam. We provide refuge in our shelter, free food, counselling, training and a safe environment.



### 2.3.1.14 Japan

Like South Korea, Japan's efforts to contain the virus were commended by other international countries. Since the country reported its first COVID-19 case in January, the country managed to tackle the challenge without a lockdown. However, restricted mobility and reduced economic activities have had negative impacts on the economy. The migrants in the country are the worst affected due to these negative impacts of the virus in Japan. Since the pandemic started, MFA's partner in Japan, Solidarity for Migrants Japan (SMJ) found poverty and visa issues were the main problems among the migrants' community in Japan. The labour issues will be intensified in the next few months, though downsizing, involving laying off part time and temporary workers who are mostly Japanese descendants from South America, has already been happening. SMJ is involved in various advocacy activities to tackle the issues of migrants.

#### 2.3.1.14.1 Solidarity for Migrants Japan (SMJ)

Solidarity for Migrants Japan (SMJ) are engaging in advocacy and lobbying by targeting Members of the Diet, national legislature of Japan, and other government bodies to tackle individual issues. For example, SMJ approached the Diet Members and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to expand the scope of some social welfare systems available to permanent residence to include other statuses of residence and this has been effective. However, the range is still narrow because those welfare services are delivered based on the fact that the person is living and will continue to live in Japan, so most of the labour migrants coming with rotation systems are excluded from this welfare.

Although the Japanese government has decided to distribute 100,000 yen to people living in Japan, including migrants, it has only included migrants who have a visa which allows more than 3 months of

stay. Because of this limitation, many migrants, such as asylum seeker, some trainees, (participants in the Technical Intern Trainee Program designed to transfer skills abroad,) and international students who are stuck due travel restrictions, have been excluded. So SMJ again approached the Diet Members and related ministries to expand the scope of the legislation and successfully achieved the target. Now, government has expanded the program for migrants who are excluded from the system, except for asylum seekers and undocumented workers. SMJ has now launched a new foundation for directly supporting migrants, mainly the ones who cannot receive the public financial support, with actual money. It started on 8<sup>th</sup> May and supported 186 migrants and asylum seekers. SMJ are planning to continue this project until August 2020. The government of Japan is yet to provide social welfare coverage to a large section student migrants. Another major concern in the country is the poor response from the local authorities even when the national government comes up with proactive responses. In the near future, SMJ, by increasing its capacity and outreach, has planned to set up hotline numbers and other helpline services to support migrant workers.



### **2.3.1.15 South Korea**

The first case of COVID-19 virus infection was reported in South Korea on January 20<sup>th</sup>. However, the country has responded well with a massive testing program and other mitigation strategies and it has largely controlled the threat of community spread. It is one of the few countries which did not announce lockdown to contain the virus. This was achieved through strong government policies along with the support of CSOs. The country hosts thousands of migrant workers and is known for its pro-immigrant worker policies. Since the migrants are most vulnerable during the health crisis, the active involvement of our partners was critical. Inequality, discrimination, and exclusion are just a few of the deeply rooted issues in the plight of many migrants, these issues are aggravated with the presence of a pandemic. In the midst of a growing atmosphere of discrimination and institutionalized xenophobia against migrants, our partner Joint Committee with Migrants in Korea (JCMK) is one of those organizations which continued to appeal to the Korean government for fairer treatment for migrants and to work to increase migrant's visibility.

#### **2.3.1.15.1 Joint Committee with Migrants in Korea (JCMK)**

The government of South Korea introduced measures regarding the public purchase of facial masks for its citizens, (where 1 person can buy 2 masks per week,) however, for migrants, only those who have foreign registration card and national health insurance can purchase these masks. This instigated JCMK's appeal to the national human rights commission on the basis of discrimination against undocumented migrants. JCMK shows the importance of voicing the demands of vulnerable groups to the government with an uncompromising attitude towards policies that promote inequality. Some of the appeals made by JCMK include: the appeal to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea on the inclusion of Migrants (especially undocumented migrants) to purchase face masks and be included in the emergency relief fund of the Korean government, as well as the consideration to release the migrants and refugees in detention centers. JCMK also tried to push to have a migrant national assembly member for the advancement of migrant representation and visibility.

JCMK understands the vulnerability of migrants at these times, so they have initiated a program to provide facial masks and hand sanitizers to the more vulnerable migrants and migrant workers. Migrant Health Association in Korea WeFriends, a member of JCMK purchased masks and hand sanitizers with funding support from the Community Chest organization and distributed them through 36 migrant support organizations. Information dissemination and awareness should also be targeted to migrants.

Although the Korean government provided information in basic languages to its people, JCMK together with other CSOs provided factual information on how to prevent infectious disease in other languages. JCMK has also jointly conducted a public forum on how the COVID-19 pandemic situation discriminates against migrants.



#### **2.3.1.16 Kuwait**

The presence of a pandemic poses a heavy impact on vulnerable groups of migrant workers in different sectors. Among those that are most affected are the undocumented migrant workers. In Kuwait, over 100,000 undocumented workers are stranded and have no work and income, they are experiencing lack of food and medical care, unpaid rents, and have no remittance to send back home for their dependent families. Domestic workers suffer from discrimination and some are even deported against their will. Other concerns are related to ‘free visa workers’ who are paying their sponsors' an annual fee for a residency permit and then working with third parties. With the issues of job termination, they are being left with no income yet still being expected to pay their annual residency permit fees. Migrant workers working with small and medium businesses are also being significantly affected. Around 250,000 migrant workers currently have no work. But even those who are working in bigger companies are also facing challenges of unemployment, non-payment of salaries or deductions, voluntary or enforced unpaid vacations, etc.

##### **2.3.1.16.1 Sandigan**

Sandigan has been conducting an awareness campaign and has started providing three (3) helplines to cater to those that are in need in times of COVID-19. They have also been providing food, counselling, and medical services through telemedicine or online medical consultations. Sandigan has also been helping in guiding and encouraging migrants to use government medical facilities for their regular medical follow up as well as supporting those undocumented migrants who are not eligible or capable of availing medical facilities due to various reasons. Since the government of Kuwait has issued amnesty, Sandigan has also assisted migrants with repatriation. Their team was divided into two parts, those involved in food pack distribution and those involved in pursuing amnesty issues. These initiatives have continued despite financial backing proving a huge challenge. Sandigan has remained committed to helping migrants in need.



#### **2.3.1.17 Oman**

Oman reported its first COVID-19 case on February 24<sup>th</sup> and since then the number of cases has been steadily increasing. As a major destination country for the blue-collar workers from other Asian country, migrants are at serious risk. They face a two-fold threat in the form of the virus itself and the job-loss due to the lockdown. Unsurprisingly most of the virus affected people are migrant workers from other countries. The Muscat Governate is sealed off with no entry or exits permitted. This is essential to containing any community spread of the virus. But the commercial impact of these measures along with the already existing oil crisis are having a negative impact on migrants, business persons, corporates and the government. It is leading to massive job-cuts and the return of migrant workers, especially Indian migrant workers.

##### **2.3.1.17.1 Charity Wing of the Indian Embassy**

The Charity Wing is actively involved with various initiatives under the guidance of the Indian Embassy to reach out and provide whatever assistance possible to those who are most affected and need support to tide over this difficult period. Charity Wing as well as other social organizations are pro-active in

providing food packs and other essentials to those in need and they try to extend help and provide food to those who have come in search of jobs on a Visit visa or a Tourist visa and who are then stuck and have no resources to pay for their accommodation, food, etc. However, the logistics of reaching these people is a challenge due to the lockdown conditions.

Responses from hospitals and nursing homes to patients with ailments other than COVID-19 infections has been disappointing and frequently these patients have often been refused medical care. The Embassy has sent out messages to all private hospitals and nursing homes to request that they accept those who need treatment. Many migrant workers who have been purchasing medicines from India for chronic problems such as heart ailments, cancer, etc have been unable to get their medicines as they are unable to afford the cost of buying them locally. The Charity Wing has approached a donor who has agreed to intervene and make provisions to address this issue.

### 3 ANALYSES & ASSESSMENT

#### 3.1.1 SWOT Analysis

From the above-mentioned responses of state and non-state actors, a SWOT analysis is developed to analyse the responses in a holistic manner. Six variables such as democracy and human rights, CSO engagement, Migrant protection, SDG goals, Engagements during covid19 and labour migration governance had been identified.

	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<b>Labour Migration Governance</b>	Decreasing state-centric notion.  Non-state stakeholders are recognized widely.	Non-homogenous & Stakeholder interest at various levels of governance is different.	The pandemic opened new avenues of partnership - possibility of a multi-layered governance within the framework of GCM can accommodate interests of all stakeholders.	Political reluctance of major destination countries  Power relations between COO and COD
<b>Migrant Protection</b>	Recognition of contribution and protection of cross border migrants	Dichotomy of citizens and non-citizens prevents access to necessary support and services  Vulnerable sections – women and irregular MWs	Vulnerability of migrant workers- existence of stakeholder awareness  Increasing importance to regional mechanisms and	Labour market pressures and nationalization, etc.  Xenophobic public rhetoric  Possible increase in irregular migration

	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
		were especially affected  Lack of investment in social protection	GCM provide new avenues.	Reluctance to sign agreements on international labour standards
<b>Democracy &amp; Migrant Rights</b>	Increasing awareness about the role of democracy and democratic participation in ensuring the rights of labour migrants at COO	Streamlining MW rights with labour and human rights  Addressing migrants' rights to overseas voting	With GCM and other multilateral mechanisms, effective link can be created between migrant right and democratic participation at various levels of governance.	Sovereignty concerns and extreme nationalistic sentiments
<b>COVID-19 Engagement</b>	Effective short-run strategies to address the vulnerabilities of migrants by state and non-state actors	Delayed responses with inefficient systems  Lack of strategy with respect to long-term impact	Every crisis is an opportunity to build back better.	Looming economic crisis  Mismatch between high supply of labour and low demand
<b>Civil Engagement</b>	Wider acceptance & clear demarcation for CSO involvement.	Cross-border migration is affected by foreign policy and diplomatic interests of nation-states. CSOs cannot fill these gaps.  Absence of financial autonomy and lack of sustainable financing.	Recognition of role of CSOs by all stakeholders  CSO's improved access to information is	Reluctance of stakeholders to enable effective partnership with CSOs nationally, regionally and globally.  Restrictions and monitoring of CSO at both destinations and origins.
<b>SDG Goals</b>	Positive response to achieve SDGs by establishing support systems	Implementation - not full-fledged yet apart from developing	Bottlenecks and pitfalls have emerged especially access to services,	Absence of income generating activities affect the financial

	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
		<p>indicators and goals at various levels.</p> <p>Lack of uniformity in implementation.</p>	access to housing and other basic necessities.	capabilities of governments in the implementation of SGD

### **3.1.2 Understanding Civic Space In Labour Migration With Respect To Human Rights Indicators On SDG 16**

With respect to SDG 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, there are several issues that concern migrant workers in Asia. The 2030 Agenda includes a number of targets which include migration such as SDGs 8, 10, 16 and 17. In particular, target 10.7 calls for the facilitation of ‘safe, regular and responsible migration’ and the implementation of ‘well-managed migration policies’. For migrant workers, SDG 16 and 17 in this context ensure the migrant workers are able to reap the benefits of their migration journey and contribute to both countries of destination and origin, without compromising their basic rights as a human, a migrant and a worker.

Despite their contributions to the socio-economic fabric of their countries, migrants are yet to be completely acknowledged in the political spectrum nor are they accorded their political rights. Even traditionally migrant-dependent and remittance-dependent economies have failed to recognize the value of migrant involvement with nation-building and development efforts. Currently the context of the slowing down of worker remittances due to conflicting pressures in destination countries could further deteriorate the attention migrants have received from traditional government structures.

The relevant issues that migrant workers face and have been exacerbated during the pandemic include the following:

- **Access to Justice** : Migrant workers have typically faced bottlenecks in accessing justice in countries of destination. Their access to redressal mechanisms and pathways are determined by their status of documentation, type of employment, gender, etc. During the pandemic, civil society reported migrant workers were repatriated without case resolution regarding their wages, due compensation and grievances as well. This particularly affected migrant workers that were detained and deported in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner – due to the shutdown and delays in the justice system, case resolution could not in many cases follow due procedure. Missions of COOs, already burdened with repatriation efforts, failed to ensure appropriate legal aid and procedure for these migrant workers as well.
- **Inclusion**: With the contracts in place and existing barriers, migrant workers are often perceived to be “temporary”, despite the fact that many have resided in countries of destination for over ten years. Because of this, they are never fully included in societies. This becomes specifically relevant in the case of female domestic workers, for whom their living and working conditions

are entirely dependent upon the employer and in certain countries, their avenues for grievance redressal are few. Laws or policies that govern domestic workers are also not included within migrant labour codes and so domestic workers are subject to a different set of standards and face a different set of problems.

Moreover, in almost all countries of destination, migrant workers do not have freedom of association and are not allowed to join existing trade unions – few unions represent migrant worker interests in collective bargaining with employers. Lack of inclusion was also clearly seen during initial efforts of focused services provided during the pandemic, wherein migrant workers were excluded from the schemes or had pre-requisites that required to be fulfilled. This particular blind spot cost countries of destination and origin dearly as migrant workers were most affected, and the compensatory actions performed were delayed and lacked preparation.

- **Participation:** In the context of Asia, particularly in the Gulf, a major corridor in migration, the mobility of migrants are more often than not determined by a contract. At countries of origin, migrant workers are rarely allowed the right to participate for their own governance. The right to active participation and to cast their vote is imperative for migrants and directly improves the quality of democratic processes within a country. The concept of participation as a principle of inclusive democracy magnifies the question of how much participation is warranted for migrant workers.
- **Lack of disaggregated data:** In countries of destination, data regarding progress with respect to the above indicators are limited – particularly for migrant workers. Data is often not disaggregated by migrant status or comparable across different groups and countries. The poor visibility of migrants in data limits understanding of their needs and reduces the accountability of governments and service providers. In countries of origin as well, government maintenance of data is poor and civil society access to data is based upon casework subject to their own resource and capacity limitations.

First, we look at the SDG indicators (under SDG 16 and 17) below which are relevant to labour migration:

**16.3: Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all**

**16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels**

**16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels**

**16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements**

**16.b: Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development**

**17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships**

**17.18: By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity,**

## **migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts**

With respect to COVID-19, the following target indicators may be considered in monitoring government and civil society interventions.

### **Possible target indicators (based upon existing suggested indicators):**

- 16.3.3 – Migrant population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism
  - o **Suggested indicators under 16.3:**
    - Legal aid services available to non-citizens including migrant workers.
    - Information regarding redress options available in major migrant worker languages.
    - Provision of compensation for work related injuries, illnesses (such as COVID-19), and deaths equivalent to that provided to nationals.
    - Specialized office for handling migrant worker complaints against employers and outsourcing agencies established.
    - Multi-language proficient help desk in countries of destination established.
- 16.a.1 -Existence of independent national human rights institutions in compliance with the Paris Principles
- 16.b.1 – Reports of migrant worker population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed during the COVID-19 period on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law
  - o **Suggested indicators under 16.b:**
    - Ratification of fundamental international and regional instruments;
    - Ratification of other UN human rights conventions;
    - Reservations (substantial) to international or regional conventions ratified;
    - Enforced treatment of equality and opportunities for all migrants irrespective of race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, and sex.
    - Increased number of countries legislating and implementing right to family reunification for all migrant workers.
- 17.18
  - o Number of countries that include migrant workers in their National Census, and mainstream labor migration within Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System (CRVS) System.
  - o Increased number of countries with updated immigration database systems documenting returning migrants.
  - o Number of migrants effectively and sustainably reintegrated and as partners for developments

### **Other SDGs and Possible Target Indicators**

With respect to migrant labour, the aforementioned SDG16 and 17 cannot be achieved without the fulfilment of other basic SDGs pertaining to labour and human rights. For migrant workers to be sufficiently supported by access to justice, transparent & accountable institutions, and non-

discriminatory laws, among others, their basic rights as a worker and a human need to be sufficiently fulfilled.

In particular they are as below (with possible target indicators to be considered):

- **3.8: Achieve universal coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health care services and access to safe effective, quality, and affordable, essential medicines and vaccines for all**
  - o Establishment or efficient enforcement of healthcare services and programmes upon return and for rehabilitation in cases of abuse and trauma
  - o Number of state institutions that provide free healthcare to migrant workers and specific care to women domestic workers.
- **8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.**
  - o Ensuring equal opportunity and specific support to both male and female migrant workers to initiate MSME's as well as financially invest wisely upon return.
- **8.8 Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment**
  - o Number of bilateral labour agreements with receiving countries addressing all rights for all sector workers.
  - o Presence of initiatives that allowed migrant workers to leave their workplace or return without repercussions.
  - o Extent of freedom in immigration/labour regimes for migrant workers to retain their visa status and work permit.

## **4 ACTION PLANS, PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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### **4.1 PROPOSAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT**

#### **4.1.1 For Countries of Destination**

- i. *Access to Healthcare*
  - o Firewalls are required between health and immigration departments. Migrants access to healthcare must not be dependent upon their documentation.
  - o Migrants, regardless of their status, should have access to free screening and treatment for COVID-19 without fear of arrest and detention.
  - o Migrant workers healthcare must be covered by health insurance provided by their employers.
- ii. *Access to Information*
  - o Information should be provided in accessible languages of migrant communities.
  - o Governments should work with Missions of COO, employers and migrant community organizations in translating, interpreting and delivering correct information to migrant workers.

- Create code of conduct for media organisations regarding xenophobic content and disinformation regarding migrant workers.

iii. *Grievance Redressal*

- Governments, through cooperation with Missions, community organisations and employers, should ensure that migrants who have lost their jobs receive their entitled salaries, wages, and benefits before they are repatriated.
- Fast-track labour courts or tribunals should be set up to effectively deal with labour complaints during the pandemic.
- Monitoring and accountability mechanisms in workplaces need to be set up regarding wages, termination, deterioration in working and living conditions and access to healthcare and basic services.
- Immediately address and allow migrant workers in detention due to visa and immigration offences to regularise their status or be repatriated, following due process and with the cooperation of the Mission.

iv. *Upholding Rights:*

- States need to necessarily ratify and adopt international covenants related to migrant labour, refugees, domestic workers as well as social protection, non-discrimination and freedom of association.
- States should focus upon inclusion of particularly vulnerable groups such as domestic workers, essential workers, low-skilled labour into social protection schemes, based upon shared responsibility with the employer.
- Migrant workers must be allowed to the freedom of association or to join existing trade unions to effectively convey and address grievances.
- Governments should keep remittance centres open and encourage safe transparent online mechanisms to allow migrants to send remittance to their families during quarantine.
- Effective immigration pathways must be flexible and allow migrants to regularise themselves, without dependence upon the employer.
- Recognising contributions of migrants as essential workers and develop pathways to citizenship and residency through a permanent cycle of contracts.

**4.1.2 For Countries of Origin:**

i. *Access to Services*

- Governments should ensure that returnee migrant workers from infected countries are able to access health care including testing and treatments for COVID 19.
- Governments should ensure that missions and embassies disseminate correct and timely information to migrant workers in countries of destination.
- Government should keep remittance centers open during quarantine and allow migrant families to access much needed funds to help them during the crisis.

ii. *Policy Development*

- In view of the changing world of work, governments need to necessarily revisit their labour migration policies to include necessary changes that accord labour, migrant, and human rights through consultations with migrant worker organisations and CSOs representing the cause.
- Accord migrants their rights to overseas voting through Missions at COD to improve participation and inclusion into democratic decision-making.
- States need to necessarily ratify and adopt international covenants related to migrant labour, refugees, domestic workers as well as social protection, non-discrimination and freedom of association.

*iii. Labour Market Development*

- Database on labour market information must be developed with disaggregated data on country where demand exist, skill levels, sectors, number of vacancies.
- Data collection efforts on migrant workers need to be necessarily strengthened through adoption of safe and secure technological platforms, bolstered by an effective monitoring mechanism.
- Encourage research on technological advancement and the future labour market. Consequently, improve and develop skills training programs at the state and local levels.

*iv. Reintegration and Remigration*

- Sustainable reintegration programs should be developed from the grassroot level that include both entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial initiatives in association with CSOs.
- Skills Recognition programmes need to be developed for returnees and potential migrant workers through regional, bilateral and national skill-oriented development frameworks for the post COVID-19 world.
- Revise and reset recruitment systems to improve protection and promotion of migrant worker rights, particularly with respect to low-skilled labour and domestic workers.
- Rethink migration as a development strategy and whether it is really a matter of choice.

## **4.2 ACTION PLANS AND PROPOSALS TO CSOS**

During the pandemic, migrants are vulnerable at the destination, upon return and during remigration. The challenges faced by each type of migrant are also different. It is important for CSOs to address each challenges and advocate with other stakeholders for their effective involvement. CSOs should conduct campaigns and provide services at both countries of origin and destinations.

### **4.2.1 At the global level**

- i. Address the non-payment of wages and dues of repatriated migrant workers at the regional and global platforms with the help of other stakeholder networks.
- ii. Regional/global campaign to address overseas voting rights for migrant workers in the post-COVID-19 world

- iii. Global campaign to raise awareness about the Global Compact for Migration and its implementation.

#### **4.2.2 At Countries of Destination**

- i. Focusing upon providing health and other basic services for vulnerable migrants such as domestic workers, irregular migrants, low-skilled workers etc
- ii. Assist workers in the repatriation process by providing financial and logistic support.
- iii. Distribute materials to create awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic, protocols and latest rules and regulations
- iv. Effectively use technology platforms and social media for information provision and to gather interest in initiatives.
- v. Establish networks with missions of countries of origin and other government departments.

#### **4.2.3 At Countries of Origin**

- i. Quarantine assistance for returnee migrant workers.
- ii. Collaborate with local and state government departments to develop long run, sustainable reintegration programs for returnees
- iii. Help migrant workers file grievances at available platforms and document grievances for advocacy purposes.
- iv. Disseminate information about labour recruitment during COVID-19 for prospective migrant workers and to dispel disinformation by unscrupulous sub-agents.
- v. Establish partnership with local governments and other stakeholders for advocacy and lobbying efforts and to improve the inclusion and participation of migrant voices at these levels.
- vi. Collaborate with skill training centres to help returnees and prospective migrant workers accredit their skills.
- vii. Develop technology platforms to promote networking and organisation of collective voices among migrants. These platforms can be used to influence policy decisions.

#### **4.2.4 CSO Advocacy Efforts**

- i. Advocate for establishing bilateral and multilateral relationship with CODs to protect the rights of migrant workers
- ii. To address the non-payment of wages and dues of migrant workers at the destination countries
- iii. For developing better rehabilitation and reintegration policies and programs for migrant workers
- iv. Demand legislations to ensure overseas voting rights of migrant workers
- v. Advocate for the implementation of GCM objectives in order to achieve SDG goals.

### **4.3 PROPOSAL TO THE KMDF 2020 / TDF 2021**

**Expanding Scope of Migrant Rights:** Governments must ensure that all migration and development policies designed and implemented at national, regional, and international levels are based on a human centred approach. This means giving primacy to the needs, priorities and rights of migrants and refugees as humans, rather than as economic entities, and is vital in the context of emerging policies that

externalize and militarise borders, undermining the human rights of migrants and refugees. States must also endeavour to transform racist and xenophobic narratives against migrants and refugees, and to embrace the social and cultural wealth that migrants bring to countries of destination.

**Centering Migrant Voices in Governance of Migration:** Migrants must be involved in the processes that affect their lives. At this critical juncture for global migration governance, support by States for meaningful and sustained involvement of migrants, trade unions, and civil society organisations in the multiple ongoing processes at regional and international levels is needed. This includes the GFMD, Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration, implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Colombo Process, Abu Dhabi Dialogue, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), among others.

**Global Governance of Migration:** Governance mechanisms, including the Global Compacts on Migrants and Refugees, and the stakeholders entrusted with their negotiation, must fulfill the highest international rights standards. To this end, states must look at existing international standards on labour rights and migrant rights, acknowledge the intersectionality of these rights with other rights areas, the related conventions which must continue to be ratified and implemented. We also call on governments to reject development models that commodify humans, depend on remittances, and exploitative, precarious work in the absence of sustainable development. Migration cannot be a strategy for the economic development of a country, and we call on governments to create decent jobs at home. Commitments to the goals and targets enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development must be implemented and delivered on through comprehensive national plans, where migrant constituencies are recognized as core to the monitoring, follow-up and review processes.

**Equality and Access to Justice for Migrants:** The two-tiered economic systems in countries of destination that differentiate between migrant workers and citizens in terms of pay and access to social protections need to be eliminated. States must ensure that migrants have access to social security and labour rights in both countries of origin and destination, and can also access justice mechanisms to adjudicate these rights. In origin countries, availability of social protection and decent work can also alleviate the pressure to migrate. There is urgent need for countries of origin to develop greater cohesiveness and solidarity through mechanisms such as regional MoUs, to establish and common standards like zero recruitment fees, a living wage, decent work conditions, and reduced remittance costs, and avoid a “race to the bottom”. There should be no exceptions or exclusion zones for different categories of workers. The right to organize too must be enshrined in the regional MoU and be fulfilled by the countries of destination. States should ensure the support mechanisms available to migrant workers in the country of destination by building the capacity of their embassies and employing labour attaches to provide support to citizens in foreign countries. They should focus on providing justice mechanisms for workers that are not only compensation oriented, but also hold the perpetrators accountable.

**Addressing Gender and Migrant Rights:** States and international organizations must include women migrant workers within policy and governance as they are disproportionately affected when it comes to participation and inclusive democracy. Many migrant women in Asia are from the domestic work sector. The concept of voice and participation is lost due to the fact that the voice in question becomes locked within the confines of a private household, where their work is not recognized and legitimized. We only begin to see in recent movements, unions formed, and campaigns such as the ILO C189 (Domestic Workers Convention) that domestic work is recognized as work. The same goes for women in the health, care, agriculture, and services sector. Their voice is often stifled because migrant women come as a response to a market economy that requires a gendered dimension of mobility.

**Climate Justice and Migration:** States and international organisations must include climate migrants/refugees in the definition of refugees. They must recognize climate change as one of the root causes that pushes people, especially the most vulnerable, into migration. States should address this root cause by putting more resources into climate adaptation, water security and food security.

**Corporate Accountability:** States must hold multinational corporations accountable on labour standards through binding treaties and regulations. Only voluntary initiatives and loose commitments are not enough. This will ensure that the workers, regardless of their status, would be fairly treated and protected.

## **Annexe**

### Major websites

<https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>

[https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/WCMS\\_748791/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/WCMS_748791/lang--en/index.htm)

<https://www.iom.int/migration-research>

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research>

<http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource-type/covid-19/>

<https://mfasia.org/>

<https://csactioncommittee.org/>

<https://justiceforwagetheft.org/>

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/>

<http://abudhabidialogue.org.ae/>

<https://www.colomboprocess.org/>

<https://www.baliprocess.net/>

<https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2020/07/17/default-calendar/assessing-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-refugees-and-migrants>

### Reports of international organisations

[https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_748992/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_748992/lang--en/index.htm)

[https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/information-resources/publications-and-tools/Brochures/WCMS\\_748979/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/information-resources/publications-and-tools/Brochures/WCMS_748979/lang--en/index.htm)

[https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS\\_748839/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_748839/lang--en/index.htm)

[https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our\\_work/ICP/MPR/covid-19\\_analytical\\_snapshots\\_compiled\\_english\\_1-50.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/MPR/covid-19_analytical_snapshots_compiled_english_1-50.pdf)

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33634>

<http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/managing-international-migration-under-covid-19-6e914d57/>

[http://www.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/132\\_covid\\_and\\_the\\_global\\_compact\\_for\\_migration.pdf](http://www.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/132_covid_and_the_global_compact_for_migration.pdf)

[https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_741512/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_741512/lang--en/index.htm)

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_746881.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_746881.pdf)

<https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/covid19-and-women.pdf>

<https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Migration%20%26%20Development%20Brief%2033.pdf>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/health/coronavirus-dh45-million-raised-to-support-abu-dhabi-government-in-covid-19-fight-1.997150>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/health/coronavirus-major-abu-dhabi-food-drive-delivers-vital-support-to-hard-hit-workers-1.1003230>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/05/government-considers-bringing-back-nepali-migrant-workers-from-covid-19-affected-countries>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/ethiopian-migrants-detained-saudi-arabia-return-](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/ethiopian-migrants-detained-saudi-arabia-return-home/#:~:text=Nearly%20150%20women%20and%20children,in%20the%20Middle%20East%20country.)

[home/#:~:text=Nearly%20150%20women%20and%20children,in%20the%20Middle%20East%20country.](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/ethiopian-migrants-detained-saudi-arabia-return-home/#:~:text=Nearly%20150%20women%20and%20children,in%20the%20Middle%20East%20country.)

<sup>v</sup> <https://np.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information-2/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1097814>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.gulf-insider.com/1500-filipinos-and-900-turks-leave-kuwait/>