

Pandemics: Statement on the Impact of Covid-19 on Migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion — Focus on Thailand

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Statement on the Impact of Covid-19 on Migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on people's lives around the world. Migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) are among the most vulnerable to the present upheaval, given their limited access to healthcare, lack of job security and precarious immigration status. As such, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) urges relevant authorities in countries of origin and destination to take immediate action to protect and support the welfare of migrants and their families.

Background

The GMS faces particular challenges in responding to the present crisis given its economic dependence on migrant labour and permeable borders. As the subregion's major destination country, Thailand is home to more than 4 million migrant workers, most of whom are from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the governments of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia have urged migrant workers to stay put and avoid travelling back to their countries of origin. However, many migrants have been compelled to return, as remaining in Thailand, for many, means no job, no food and a real risk of homelessness. On 26 March, Thailand declared a state of emergency by way of an Emergency Decree that introduced a raft of measures to "quickly remedy the emergency situation and prevent its escalation".[1]

Ahead of the Emergency Decree on 23 March, all land borders were closed, but many have since reopened, in response to the weight of migrants attempting to cross. By 25 March, the Thai government estimated that 60,000 migrants had left Thailand. The uncertainty surrounding border closures has added to the sense of panic felt within migrant communities during this public health emergency and has led to more migrants crossing at non-official crossing points.

On 24 March, the Thai cabinet approved measures to ease immigration regulations to allow registered migrant workers and their children to extend their right to remain and work in the country until June 30. On the same day, the Thai Cabinet also approved draft Ministerial Regulations and Notifications regarding compensation and relief measures for employers and employees registered with the Social Security Fund (SSF).

While these measures are welcomed, they do not go far enough to help those who face a loss of livelihood due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A significant number of migrant workers will not qualify for these government initiatives as they are either undocumented or ineligible to register since the SSF excludes many migrant occupations on the grounds that they are in the informal sector.

Similarly, the easing of immigration requirements for documented migrant workers, disregards the critical situation faced by the significant number of undocumented migrant workers who remain subject to immigration enforcement action. Even for documented migrant workers, information concerning work permits and visa renewals has not been effectively conveyed, and relevant authorities, including Thai immigration and Embassies of migrant countries of origin, appear overwhelmed and are sending conflicting messages to migrants.

Migrants who have returned to their countries of origin also face a host of challenges. Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos have all begun quarantining migrant returnees, first by way of home quarantine and more recently at government quarantine centres where in operation or community-based quarantine centres in their home areas. Migrants currently have limited access to accurate information concerning the operation and arrangements regarding such policies. Arranging safe forms of travel to their homes is also a matter that requires immediate attention. Some communities are making their own arrangements for the return of migrants; these range from practical isolation measures to measures driven by fear, which may fuel stigmatization against returnees. Members of communities have a lack of access to accurate information and are concerned as healthcare facilities in rural areas are particularly ill equipped.

The mass return of migrants will also have a significant impact in countries of origin at both the micro and macro level. Many migrants no longer hold documentation in their country of origin making it difficult for them to access social protection, including basic healthcare. The sudden influx of returnees is also the cause of hardship at the household level, as families must feed and accommodate returning relatives at short notice. Given the prolonged shutdown that is anticipated as a result of the Covid-19 emergency, the loss of remittances is likely to have a major economic impact on migrant countries of origin in the GMS.

Recommendations

1. In light of the above challenges, MMN calls on the relevant authorities to implement the following:
2. For the Thai Ministry of Health to publicly announce that all migrants, regardless of immigration status, can access free public healthcare that is appropriately prepared to deal with the complexities of a pandemic. The current crisis has highlighted the urgent need for universal healthcare, both from a human rights and public health standpoint.
3. For the relevant authorities in Thailand and countries of origin to mount far-reaching coordinated public information campaigns aimed at migrants to inform them of important matters relating to the Covid-19 pandemic in appropriate migrant languages. Such information must include: preventative measures to stop the spread of Covid-19, what to do and how to contact the health authorities in the event of falling ill, immigration updates, border closures, how to social distance and self-isolate, quarantine requirements, and relief measures that are available for migrants in case of sudden loss of income or dismissal from work.
4. For the Thai Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Health to issue immediate occupational health and safety guidelines in Thai and migrant languages for employers and workers who continue to work, including domestic workers.
5. For the Thai Government to release all immigration detainees. In light of the government's Emergency Decree ordering the "closure of Places that are Risk-Prone to the Transmission of the Disease"[2], immigration detention centres and other such holding facilities should be closed. The overcrowded conditions and inadequate provision of healthcare make such facilities

“epidemiological pumps” that facilitate the spread of highly contagious diseases such as Covid-19. Moreover, immigration detention is not a punishment and is justified only as far as it is necessary to facilitate removal or deportation, which, given current border closures and global restrictions on travel, make such operations impossible.

6. For the Thai Government to pursue responsive and appropriate relief measures that benefit all workers including informal sector workers and undocumented migrant workers, who face loss of work and income.

For the Ministries of Labour and of Immigration in Thailand and countries of origin to coordinate on the return of migrants regarding screening, quarantining, and limiting the numbers allowed to cross the border at a time.

7. For countries of origin to ensure that screening of migrant returnees is carried out in a sensitive and transparent manner and provide migrant returnees with clear information concerning available healthcare and quarantine processes. Countries of origin must also provide accurate information to its general public and prevent discrimination against migrant returnees.

8. For countries of origin to provide migrant returnees who are stuck at the border with safe onward travel to their home communities.

9. For the countries of origin to relax documentation requirements to ensure that all migrant returnees have access to public healthcare, regardless of their household registration status.

10 For countries of origin to provide appropriate support for families who have lost income as a result of the return of migrant family members. Such measures may be considered part of respective countries’ relief measures for all workers, who have lost income as a result of the adverse economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

11. For the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, to work in unity and provide a coordinate response regarding the movement of people in ways that will reduce the potential of virus spreading events while maintaining the dignity and rights of migrants.

The Covid-19 crisis has heightened the urgent need for governments to provide a social safety net for the most vulnerable, including migrant workers, since the disease does not respect borders or care about people’s immigration status or social standing. MMN urges all governments in the GMS to base their systems of labour migration governance on a human rights framework. Governments must not use the ongoing Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to normalize intrusive surveillance and restrictions on people’s liberty once the present crisis ends. Emergency powers, where used, must be time-limited, proportionate, subject to public scrutiny and not be used for authoritarian ends.

ABOUT THE MEKONG MIGRATION NETWORK

Founded in 2003, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) is a sub-regional network of civil society organisations and research institutes working towards the protection and promotion of the rights of migrants and their families in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. MMN’s areas of joint action include collaborative research, advocacy, capacity building and networking. MMN members operate in both countries of origin and destination, have unique expertise in the field, and are in close contact with migrant workers at a grassroots level. For more information on MMN, please visit MMN’s webpage at: www.mekongmigration.org

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Notes

[1] Regulation Issued under Section 9 of the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations B.E. 2548 (2005)(No.1) Available at <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/contents/files/news3-20200329-164122-910029.pdf>.

[2] Ibid., Clause 2.

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