



Leadership Group for Responsible Recruitment South East Asia Chapter



Member Update on Countries of Focus: Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers in South East Asia

27 March 2020

Note: The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) is providing regular updates to members of the Leadership Group for Responsible Recruitment on the impacts of COVID-19 as they relate to migrant workers in key countries across South East Asia, a region of special focus for the Leadership Group. These briefings are being made available on the IHRB website, in the event that they may be of interest and assistance more broadly. While every effort is made to ensure the information herein is up to date and accurate, the situation with COVID-19 is changing on a daily basis. You are encouraged to seek further information and clarification by visiting the websites of respective governments, industry and other organisations, or contacting them directly. Please also refer to past updates for further information. Links to other sites and statements are not an endorsement nor approval by IHRB or the Leadership Group for Responsible Recruitment.

The following provides an overview of key migrant worker destination countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, and major source country, Myanmar.

THAILAND

The IOM is producing a **weekly newsletter**, to focus on the impacts COVID-19 on migrant workers. The newsletter combines key updates from the Government of Thailand and governments of the neighbouring countries in relation to migrant workers currently employed in Thailand. The updates provide information for migrant workers and their employers about the governmental decisions relevant to workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. If you wish to be on the mailing list of this newsletter, please email, Pattarada Rittang (prittang@iom.int) and Yunxian Jiang (yjiang@iom.int)

The IOM has produced **videos** for Cambodian and Myanmar workers in Thailand on COVID-19 prevention and response.

Myanmar version: <https://youtu.be/9LujM51s8T4>, Khmer version: <https://youtu.be/m6q3MypjdZQ>

Border restrictions and impact on migrant workers

With effect from 22 Mar 2020, Thailand has restricted entry for non-residents, with strict requirements for health certification and medical insurance. Thai land border checkpoints, the main routes of entry for migrant workers, have also been closed. These include the crossings between Thailand and Malaysia, Thailand and Laos in Nakhon Phanom, and the crossings between Thailand and Cambodia in Sa Kaeo Province.

About 60,000 migrant workers have left Thailand after new restrictions were announced, and authorities shut down malls and many businesses to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These measures have displaced many low-wage Thai and migrant workers.¹

The partial lockdown in Thailand exempts construction, leaving migrant workers employed in the construction sector exposed to infection risks. Construction is the top employer of migrants, with workers from Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos making up nearly 600,000 migrants in the sector. The workers generally live in refashioned containers or tin and plywood shacks near the, with poor sanitation and limited access to potable water.²

Migrant workers' access to health care

Migrant workers are entitled for COVID-19 screening and treatment regardless of their legal status. Documented workers are either covered by the Migrant Health Insurance Scheme or the Social Security Fund. Under the COMMUNICABLE DISEASES ACT, B.E. 2558, migrant workers have access to healthcare services, even if they do not possess a work permit or visa. According to the Act, the expenses will be covered under the national budget. However, NGOs and CSOs working with migrant workers raise concerns that many migrant workers are reluctant to seek medical assistance due to fears of having their work permits revoked and being repatriated. As of 25th March, there have been two cases of Myanmar migrant workers infected with the coronavirus.

¹ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1886280>

² <https://news.trust.org/item/20200323114302-yxl5w/>

Income provision

Migrant workers who are members of Social Security Fund are entitled to benefits for income loss due to employer suspension or the government order. With effect from March 1st, financial assistance for workers registered under the social security system who have either lost their jobs or have been suspended due to COVID-19, are entitled to be given 50% of their salaries not exceeding 15,000 baht a month for a maximum of 180 days.³ For further details please read, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1883650/social-security-fund-to-lend-helping-hand>

Gaps in services for migrants

The Migrant Working Group and MFA members have raised the following concerns.

1. Migrant workers whose documents are expiring on 31st March and need to renew their documents through the MoU system (returning to origin country) may not be able to procure the health insurance benefits.
2. Migrant workers under the border employment scheme (section 64) are unable to renew their documents or return to work due to the border closure.
3. Advice being available for workers on how they can access the income entitlement under the Social Security Fund or health care under Migrant Health Insurance Scheme

³ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1883650/social-security-fund-to-lend-helping-hand>

MYANMAR

With effect from 19 March 2020, Myanmar has temporarily closed all land borders with its neighbouring countries Thailand, China, Laos and Bangladesh to foreign nationals. India-Myanmar border checkpoints were closed earlier this month.

The Myanmar government has suspended the movement of migrant workers to Thailand. Returning workers are subject to health checks and have to quarantine themselves in villages across the country for 14 days. Those home quarantined need to report to the Township Health Department (via phone) and will be monitored by health and general administrative staff. As of 25th March, at least 11 have been sent to hospital with high fever.⁴

⁴ https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1886280#cxrecs_s

MALAYSIA

Border restrictions and impact on migrant workers

Malaysia, where many South Asian and Indonesian migrants work, has shut its borders and restricted internal movement until 14th April. An estimated 6,000 Indonesian migrant workers have returned to their home country.⁵

With effect from 16th March and extended to 14th April 2020, Malaysia has imposed a nationwide movement control order (MCO), which restricts foreigners from entering the country. Malaysia also shut its borders with Singapore. Since Immigration is closed, all visa processes have been suspended. If a foreign national's visa expires during the MCO, s/he will not be detained for overstaying but will be allowed to renew the visas after the lifting of the MCO.

The order includes a total halt to work in the construction, plantation and manufacturing sector. Only companies providing essential services (eg. transport, delivery, online orders, etc.) are allowed to operate. For such services workers are provided masks, gloves and sanitizers, including training to sanitize their hands. Working hours have been shortened and there is no overtime offered to the workers. Workers leave work at 5.30 or 6.00pm, as there are many police roadblocks in the evening.

Key medical glove factories cutting staff 50% amid virus.

Malaysia's medical glove factories, which make most of the world's critical hand protection, are operating at half capacity. The Malaysian government ordered factories to halt all manufacturing starting 18th March. A few medical glove factories have been allowed exemptions to operate, but only with half of their workforce to reduce the transmission risks.⁶

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) announced 24th March that it was lifting a block on imports from Malaysian medical glove manufacturer, WRP Asia Pacific, where workers had allegedly been forced to pay recruitment fees as high as \$5,000 in their home countries, including Bangladesh and Nepal. The CBP said they lifted the September order after learning the company is no longer producing the medical gloves under forced labor conditions.⁷

Access to health care

Documented migrants have access to public health care as their employers need to provide medical insurance for their workers. While the medical costs for migrants are much higher, all workers regardless of their status, who display symptoms of COVID-19, or who have had contact with a COVID-19 positive person will receive free screening and treatment.

However, many migrants are often unaware of their entitlement to healthcare, and some are afraid to come forward fearing their immigration status and other documentations might be checked by the

⁵ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/22/indonesians-rushing-to-balik-kampung>

⁶ <https://apnews.com/6202bebc5b0f5fa80904d06e50b8429f>

⁷ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-revokes-withhold-release-order-disposable-rubber-gloves>

authorities. The high number of undocumented migrant workers and refugees presents challenges to conduct contact tracing of infection cases.⁸

Assistance from NGOs, CSOs and other organisations.

CSOs and MFA members have been preparing posters and voice messages in different migrant languages for key notices from the government on the 'stay home' policy, available screenings and treatments for COVID-19, etc. Some CSOs are providing subsidised food vouchers for daily waged migrant workers. Many CSOs are also seeking urgent funds to continue providing assistance and necessities to affected and vulnerable migrant workers.

⁸ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2020/03/22/ngo-include-undocumented-migrant-workers-and-refugees-in-covid-19-response-plan>

SINGAPORE

Border restrictions and impact on migrant workers

From 23rd March 2020, all non-residents and short-term visitors (from anywhere in the world) will not be allowed to enter or transit through Singapore. Singapore has also ceased port calls for all cruise vessels, according to the country's Maritime and Port Authority.

Thousands of Malaysian work permit holders, who usually commute across the border daily, have been housed temporarily in Singapore after Malaysia implemented its lockdown on 18th March, for an initial two-week period until 31st March. The Singapore government is offering support for employers who have to find accommodation for their Malaysian workers, by giving them S\$50 for each worker a day, capped at 14 days. However, the temporary housing support for Malaysian migrant workers will not be extended beyond March 31, after Malaysia extended its national lockdown until 14th April. ⁹

By 17th March, about 10,000 Malaysian workers who had chosen to stay in Singapore to work had been matched to temporary accommodations there. There have also been reports of Malaysian migrants, working in cleaning and manufacturing industries, sleeping near train stations because their employers had not promised them accommodation.¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/malaysia-lockdown-temporary-housing-malaysian-workers-will-not-be-extended-beyond-march-31>

¹⁰ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/no-place-stay-some-malaysian-workers-sleeping-rough-near-kranji-mrt-station>