



# 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

3 April 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 Leadership Group migrant worker destination countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, and major source country, Myanmar.

### **THAILAND**

The IOM is producing a weekly newsletter called Flash Update, to focus on the impact of 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](mailto:prittang@iom.int)) and Yunxian Jiang ([yjiang@iom.int](mailto:yjiang@iom.int)). Attached is the Flash Update for 27 March 2020.

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**

The Thai government has initiated a state of emergency effective from 25th March to 30th April. A partial lockdown of Bangkok and order by the Thai Interior Ministry to close 18 border points took effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> March. Thai sea, land and air borders are closed to all foreigners except goods

transportation crews, diplomats, and work permit holders. Thais returning to the kingdom are required to present a certificate from Thai embassy and health certificates upon their departure.

Estimates of migrant workers leaving the country before the border closure range between 60,000 and 200,000 people. During the exodus, few were able to practice social distancing in the crowded bus stations and border areas, raising fears of infection. To avoid the risks of infection, the Myanmar<sup>1</sup> and Cambodian<sup>2</sup> embassies in Thailand have discouraged migrant workers from returning home.

However, the Thai government's temporary ban on cross-border travel between Thailand and neighbouring countries failed due to the high volume of migrants trying to return to their home countries. To avoid crowding at border checkpoints, the borders at Chiang Rai (North to Myanmar), Mae Sot (West to Myanmar), Sa Kaeo (East to Cambodia) and Nakhon Phanom (Northeast to Laos) were re-opened temporarily.<sup>3</sup> While many 'legal' migrants crossed at the Myawady checkpoint in Kayin State to Myanmar last week, thousands more walked back home via illegal routes across the porous border. <sup>4</sup>

With the partial lockdown exempting construction, hundreds of migrant workers from other sectors have also moved to work at high-rise buildings and apartment complexes. Migrant Workers in entertainment and retail are also losing jobs due to the requirement to shut down such businesses. Many domestic workers have also been dismissed by their employers.<sup>5</sup>

For further information on border restrictions, migrant workers' permits and compensations, please refer to the attached **IOM Flash Update**.

### **Assistance from NGOs, CSOs and other organizations.**

The Thai government is issuing communications mostly in the Thai language, so civil society organizations are working on translating health alerts and information about legal rights and protections to migrant workers in their own languages. CSOs have stressed that a priority was ensuring accurate updated information and news was disseminated to migrant communities across Thailand. Communication and coordination of health services and emergency aid was also crucial. CSOs are also concerned about food access for migrants without work if they were to remain in Thailand.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-migrants-thailand-discouraged-new-year-homecoming-amid-covid-19-concerns.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1881345/cambodian-workers-told-not-to-leave-thailand-amid-covid-19-fears>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1884830%23cxrecs\\_s](https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1884830%23cxrecs_s)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/migrant-workers-must-be-included-myanmars-covid-19-response.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://laborrights.org/blog/202003/covid-19-impact-migrant-workers-thailand>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/migrants-thailand-03252020205717.html>

## **MYANMAR**

### **Returning migrants**

With effect from 19th March, 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 in March.

Due to the high volume of migrants at the border gates, the Thai mayor of Mae Sot had the No. 2 bridge into Myanmar opened to allow migrants to cross. Many workers were also crossing the border illegally by traveling across the Thaungyin river that flows between the two countries.<sup>7</sup>

CSOs report that returning migrants have been discriminated and treated with suspicion of infection by local communities.

### **Workers in Myanmar**

In Myanmar, the Ministry of Health and Sports has advised that garment and other factories should not close, as public concern grows about the spread of the coronavirus. Factory owners have also objected to suggestions to suspend operations until the end of April. In Yangon Region, 38 factories had closed by March 23 due to the impact of the COVID-19, leaving 20,000 workers jobless. The garment sector is the worst hit according to the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM).

The government will give out loans with 1% interest rate to the most affected businesses. Workers who have lost their jobs are entitled to 60% of their income not exceeding 6 months from the Social Security Board. Workers suspected of COVID-19 infection and placed under quarantine will receive 60 percent of their salary from the Social Security Board.

### **Access to health care**

There is a lack of medical equipment and health care workers at hospitals, especially in remote ethnic areas. This also presents challenges for adequate quarantine facilities as returning migrants add pressure to the already limited medical and health care facilities. A number of COVID-19 volunteer teams formed by businesses and civil society groups to provide support also lack protective equipment.

## **MALAYSIA**

The Malaysian government is encouraging all migrant workers in the country, including undocumented migrants, to voluntarily seek medical testing. An urgent appeal was made for those who attended the mass prayer gathering at the Sri Petaling Mosque between 27th February and 3rd March 2020.

The IOM Malaysia has produced posters in 14 languages of the migrants' countries of origin, namely Bahasa Indonesia, Nepali, Bengali, Vietnamese, Khmer, Urdu, Thai, Tamil, Sinhalese, Burmese, Hakha, and English, Malay and Mandarin. The posters advise that all migrants, regardless of their status,

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/migrants-thailand-03252020205717.html>

are able to obtain free screening and treatment of COVID-19 at designated Malaysian public hospitals.

UNHCR Malaysia is also providing hotline services in different languages to assist migrants, refugees and asylum seekers unable to access the national crisis Hotlines. The UNHCR Hotlines are available daily from 7am-10pm.

For PDF versions of the above IOM posters and UNHCR hotlines, please contact Joanne Tsu Fae CHUA National Programme Officer [jochua@iom.int](mailto:jochua@iom.int)

## SINGAPORE

Despite being lauded as a case study in keeping its COVID-19 threat under control, Singapore has toughened its social controls as its first deaths were recorded and infection numbers have risen in the past week. It has further tightened border controls and stepped up social distancing enforcement. Starting 7th April until 4th May, Singapore will be shutting most workplaces except those offering 'essential services' such as food establishments, hospitals and transport. All schools will temporarily close and move lessons online. Residents have been advised to stay at home and avoid socialising with others beyond their own household.<sup>8</sup>

The tightly-packed dormitories where many migrant workers live at make measures like social distancing impossible, add to a higher risk for virus transmission. Stricter rules at dormitories to enforce safe distancing are being applied. These include limiting numbers at recreation rooms and staggered timings for kitchen and shower use.<sup>9</sup>

### Assistance from CSOs

HealthServe in Singapore has set up a designated [Migrant Health Relief Fund](#) to provide relief and support to low wage and disadvantaged migrant workers in Singapore and their families who are directly and indirectly affected by COVID-19. HealthServe hopes to utilize the funds for the caring for the wellbeing of migrant workers serving quarantine order, follow up care for infected migrant workers and telecounselling services for migrant workers.

### Other migrant worker updates

#### Migrant domestic workers

The IOM CREST has highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on migrant domestic workers.<sup>10</sup> Migrant domestic workers, usually women, are rarely covered by labour law, leaving them without the associated assistance and protection mechanisms. They face gender imbalances in culture and workspace, and they often live in the homes of their employers. These dynamics make migrant domestic workers highly vulnerable and hidden from the public eye, placing them in a position where they may be unable to leave an abusive employer or seek help.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has taken an extra toll on domestic workers. Since the advice is to not leave the homes (shared with their employers), they are working more hours, without extra pay or leave compensation, and unable to refuse work on their weekly day off. As such, they lose valuable access to social networks, support and information on what to do.

### Action required from brands, employers, recruiters and governments

The IOM CREST has also recommended the following actions for brands, employers and recruiters

<sup>11</sup> :

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/most-workplaces-to-close-schools-will-move-to-full-home-based-learning-from-next>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/stricter-rules-at-foreign-worker-dormitories-to-enforce-safe-distancing>

<sup>10</sup> <https://crest.iom.int/news/covid-19-places-migrant-workers-highly-vulnerable-situations%C2%A0>

<sup>11</sup> <https://crest.iom.int/news/covid-19-places-migrant-workers-highly-vulnerable-situations%C2%A0>

- Strengthen communication on COVID-19 guidance in migrant workers' languages and through migrant communities
- Ensure access to and availability of health care and personal protective equipment
- Ensuring decent and hygienic working and living conditions and appropriate measures for social distancing and self-isolation
- Ease economic burden for workers, including migrant workers, by ensuring they are covered by social protection measures. This includes paid sick leave and reimbursement of recruitment fees and related costs paid by migrant workers
- Consider flexible arrangements for migrant workers in situations where employment sites have to close
- Ensure overtime is on a voluntary basis and compensated at a premium rate
- The employer should take affirmative action to promote migrant workers' freedom of movement. Employers have a responsibility to let the worker return home voluntarily and to provide direct access to identity and travel documents at any time
- Work with authorities in countries of origin and destination to find solutions for migrant workers that are unable to return home due to travel restrictions
- Develop contingency planning
- Set up a mechanism for burden sharing between brands and suppliers to incentivize protection measures for migrant workers

## **Other resources:**

### **Latest news on the implications of the outbreak for business and human rights**

The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre is providing the latest news on the implications of the outbreak for business and human rights

### **IOM Responds to Covid-19**

A dedicated web page on COVID-19 from the IOM global website –