

COVID-19: Impact on migrant workers and country response in Myanmar

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Statistics and data on movements

The first case of COVID-19 in Myanmar was confirmed on 23 March. As of 22 June 2020, Myanmar Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS) had reported 290 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 200 recovering and six deaths. In total, 60,070 tests have been administered,ⁱⁱ and 5,714 persons are currently under investigation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over four million Myanmar workers are estimated to work overseas with the largest number, approximately two million in Thailand. A significant number of migrants in Thailand are living with their families, mainly their young children but in some cases also the elderly. In the week of 22 March, there was a sudden unexpected return of tens of thousands of workers, re-entering Myanmar from Thailand at all border crossings, official and unofficial. A combination of factors motivated the return including the fear of the situation of COVID-19 worsening, job losses, or expected job losses (at least temporarily). The work permits of workers under the Nationality Verification system in Thailand were due to expire. In addition, migrants traditionally return home to be with their families for the very important water festival in April, and with an emergency decree announced for 24 March, many migrants wanted to get across the border before the decree was enforced.

Neither Thailand nor Myanmar were prepared for the exodus of migrants, and the large numbers of migrants congregated on both sides of the border raised the alarm in terms of the spread of COVID-19. As migrants arrived, they were given a fever test. Those with a fever were isolated in shelters on the border, while the others were sent home on buses and told to self-isolate for 14 days. With living conditions in most rural communities not being suitable for self-isolation, many communities arranged their own makeshift quarantine centres on the outskirts of their villages. Recognizing the need for more formal measures, the Government of Myanmar made an appeal to other migrants to delay their return, initially to 15 April and later extended to 30 April to allow time to set up quarantine facilities in government schools and training centres across the country. Very few migrants did return at that time, as a lockdown in Thailand included restrictions on inter provincial travel, making it impossible for migrants to get to the border.

ⁱⁱ This figure represents the number of tests not the number of people tested. People who test positive and people in quarantine may be tested multiple times.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ministry of Health and Sports, "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Surveillance Dashboard (Myanmar)", 2020, <https://mohs.gov.mm/Main/content/publication/2019-ncov> [accessed 22 June 2020].

The 14-day period of quarantine was extended to 21 days in a quarantine facility followed by seven days home quarantine. To date, over 7,000 quarantine facilities across the country are in place. However, with the expected opening of schools on 1 July, many of the quarantine facilities need to be moved to other facilities to allow for disinfection before schools re-open.

In an attempt to make the second phase of movement of migrants back from Thailand to Myanmar more organized, the Myanmar embassy asked migrants wishing to return to apply online. Within a few days, 16,000 migrants had applied, with the number continuing to increase. The two countries made arrangements for buses to ferry migrants to the border at Mae Sot and Ranong.

This second return movement began on 22 May and was much more organized in terms of physical distancing, taking details and transferring migrants to quarantine facilities in their home communities. At this time there was a large number of migrants who did not register with the Myanmar Embassy and arranged their own transport, often at considerable costs.

Over the period 22 March to 15 June, a total of 99,058 migrants were recorded entering Myanmar from Thailand; while 36,280 were recorded as entering from China and 131 from Lao People's Democratic Republic.^{iv} Approximately two-thirds of the recorded returnees were men. The largest number of recorded migrants returned to their home communities in Bago (6,108), followed by Kayin and Mon, then Magway, Mandalay and Ayarwaddy. With other states and regions recording less than 1,000 returnees.^v

On 22 May the Department of Labour issued a letter to the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agency Federation (MOEAF) regarding the restarting of the recruitment procedures sometime after 31 May for Myanmar workers seeking employment in Thailand.^{vi} According to the letter, migrant workers need health certificates and will undergo health checks at the border. Overseas employment agencies will be required to follow the regular recruitment process, including having the demand letter from employers indicating the number of migrant workers needed, a clear commitment

^{iv} The actual number of migrants returning cross border may be higher as the borders are porous and some migrants may cross undetected.

^v UN Core Group on Returning Migrants: Myanmar/Situation Response Covid-19, 2020, <https://www.iom.int/countries/myanmar> [accessed 22 June 2020].

^{vi} Ibid.

that migrant workers will receive an employment contract and begin employment within 60 days of deployment, and a commitment to follow COVID-19 related instructions from the Thai government

On 10 June, the National Level Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) issued an announcement that states, “*anyone entering Myanmar through an unauthorized entry point from a foreign country and if such person has been accepted with the knowledge that such person has entered the country illegally, it is hereby notified that legal action should be taken in accordance with prevailing laws.*”^{vii} Although the cross-border movement of migrants was restricted, controlled cross-border trade has continued. The Thai-Myanmar cross-border trade volume between October 2019 and 29 May 2020 was US\$ 2.71 billion; the land border of Htee Khee in Tanintharyi accounting for most of the trade, followed by Myawaddy according to the official statistics of the Commerce Ministry. This had declined by US\$ 103.9 million compared to the same period last year.^{viii}

On 8 May, 400 Myanmar workers were deported from Malaysia having spent months in immigration centres; other deportations followed. Thirteen of the returnees from Malaysian detention centres have tested positive to COVID-19.

Since 30 April the government of Myanmar has organized relief flights to bring back Myanmar citizens (including students, professionals, migrant workers, religious pilgrims) stranded in other countries. By 15 June, 4,105 migrant workers had been assisted to return from over ten countries including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Viet Nam.^{ix}

^{vii} *Global New Light of Myanmar*: “Republic of the Union of Myanmar National-Level Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Announcement” in *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/republic-of-the-union-of-myanmar-national-level-central-committee-for-prevention-control-and-treatment-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-announcement/> [accessed 22 June 2020].

^{viii} *Global New Light of Myanmar*, “Thai-Myanmar border trade reaches \$2.7 bln this FY”, in *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/thai-myanmar-border-trade-reaches-2-7-blm-in-this-fy/> [accessed 22 June 2020].

^{ix} *Ibid.*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also arranged relief flights for 83 Myanmar seamen on-board cruise ships in France, Italy, and the Netherlands. Anecdotal reports suggest that there are many more seamen stranded around the world.

Myanmar nationals returning from overseas make up 121 of the 290 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Myanmar. Returnees with COVID-19 are Myanmar nationals returning from overseas^x (from India: 45, Thailand: 25, Malaysia: 16, United Arab Emirates: 8, Bangladesh: 6, United States of America: 5, United Kingdom: 4, Singapore: 3, China: 1, Italy: 1, Turkey: 1, and 5: no details available).

Government containment measures

In March the government formed the National Level Central Committee for COVID-19 Prevention, Control and Treatment with military and civilian ministries to support measures around law enforcement and stability and to step up government efforts to respond to the pandemic in the country.

Gradual steps in terms of prevention of the virus were taken. Bans were put in place on all large events including all festivities for Thingyan, the week-long annual water festival in mid-April. Cinemas and all entertainment venues were shut down. Gatherings of more than four people were banned, with a night time curfew in place. The Yangon government imposed a stay-at-home order for citizens during the water festival holiday from 10-19 April, except for people contributing to COVID-19 protection, control, treatment and support. Interprovincial travel was restricted with many communities enforcing local level quarantine for people coming from Yangon and other areas. During this period all factories were closed. On 19 April the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population called for all factories to remain closed until 30 April so that inspections could be carried out.

The government disseminated information on the COVID-19 situation through multiple media platforms including loud speakers, pamphlets, SMS messages, and a free app.

^x Ministry of Health and Sports: "Covid-19 Situation Report 74 (20-6-2020)", 2020, <https://mohs.gov.mm/page/9575> [accessed 22 June 2020].

With many of the COVID-19 positive cases being identified amongst people entering the country from overseas and in line with measures in other countries, restrictions on travel into the country have remained in place with no commercial flights in or out of the country. On 16 May the MOHS ordered COVID-19 tests for all Myanmar nationals coming from foreign countries. Over 7,000 quarantine facilities^{xi} were set up around the country, mostly to quarantine returning migrants.

On 18 May MOHS submitted a new draft of the Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases Law to the Lower House of Parliament.

On 31 May measures to prevent COVID-19 were extended but with some restrictions eased, including the opening of restaurants and shops, with preventative measures in place. Currently the measures have been extended to the end of June.

Problems faced by women and men migrant workers

According to a survey conducted by ILO on the experiences of migrant workers in ASEAN during COVID-19, in Myanmar^{xii} the following trends are visible:

- 58 per cent of returning migrants from Thailand expected to re-migrate; often to their previous job. However, with long quarantine requirements in both Myanmar and Thailand, migrants may not be able to return fast enough for the needs of the employers and may find that their jobs have been taken by unemployed migrants who remained in Thailand. For migrant workers with work permits valid for several more months, it is unclear if these work permits (linked to employers) will remain valid.
- Migrants noted that in some quarantine facilities their families had to provide them food every day. The migrants feared this was a financial burden on their families.
- Many communities feared the importation of the coronavirus from people returning from overseas. Some migrants felt that the quarantine quelled the communities' fears and made it easier to be accepted after quarantine while

^{xi} Covid-19 Situation Report #74 <https://mohs.gov.mm/page/9575>

^{xii} ILO: "Experiences of ASEAN migrant workers during COVID-19", 2020, https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/issue-briefs/WCMS_746881/lang--en/index.htm [accessed 22 June 2020].

other migrants felt the quarantine increased the stigma against people returning from overseas by singling them out as possible COVID-19 carriers.

- From the interviews conducted for the study, returning migrant women were immediately busy in the household while men did not have a similar role to step into.

Post-quarantine, returned migrants and their families face economic hardships with an extra mouth to feed and no remittances. The job market may be less than vibrant leaving many migrants with few choices of work. In the major cities, usually a source of employment, some factories, hotels, and other businesses have laid people off, making even greater competition for jobs. While migrants may have learnt new skills overseas, they are rarely recognized or accredited on their return.

Responses by the Government to assist migrant workers

The Government of Myanmar through Myanmar embassies have collected names of migrants wishing to return and provided logistical help in organizing such returns.

The local Departments of Labour in States and Regions have received returning migrants, together with the Ministry of Health and Sports, General Administration Department and other relevant departments at entry points on the border. The Labour Exchange offices with Migrant Worker Resource Centres supported by the ILO and IOM have been particularly active in providing assistance to incoming migrants. More recently, the assistance to migrants is coordinated through the COVID-19 response teams.

In the first week of June, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population together with the General Administration Department started to collect more detailed information from all returning migrants including in relation to their skills and plans to find employment in Myanmar or to re-migrate.

Released in late April, the government's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP)^{xiii} puts in measures to mitigate the economic impact of the global pandemic by implementing new actions and measures ranging from monetary reforms and

^{xiii}Ministry of Information: "Overcoming as One: Covid 19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP)", <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=tags/overcoming-one-covid-19-economic-relief-plan-cerp> [accessed 22 June 2020].

increased government spending to steps to ease the impact on workers, the vulnerable and households while strengthening the county's healthcare system

Migration is not referred to in the CERP, but returning migrant workers are mentioned under Goal 3: Easing the Impact on Labourers and Workers. Action 3.1.2 tasks the Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry with overseeing labour intensive community infrastructure projects for those laid off, or returning migrants. The other two action plans under this goal have already been implemented which include extending the period of healthcare, medicine and travel benefits from six months to one year from the date of unemployment for eligible members of the Social Security system.

Social security contributions were temporarily suspended for factories and establishments closed due to COVID-19. As Myanmar's social security system does not yet implement an unemployment system, a special temporary measure was announced that members of the social security system would receive 40 per cent of their wages.

Snapshot of responses by trade unions, civil society, the ILO, and the UN system

The ILO through the Developing Internal and International Labour Migration Governance (DIILM) project and the TRIANGLE in ASEAN project is supporting the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM) and CSO partners (Mawk Kon Local Development Organisation, Future Light Centre, Foundation for Education and Development, Samaritans Purse, and Northern Shan Baptist Convention) to provide services to potential and returned migrants in Keng Tung, Tachilek, Lashio, Theinni, Myawaddy, Kawthaung, Htee Kee, Three Pagaoda Pass, Yangon, and Bago. These organizations were then able to immediately assist the local authorities to provide returning migrants with basic personal protective equipment (masks, hand gel, soap) and to provide care packages (water, sanitary pads, snacks). The CTUM has expanded their outreach according to demand to other States and Regions including Mon State, Sagaing and Magway Regions. As well as care packages, the organizations have provided assistance with food aid to quarantine facilities, transportation costs, and, where needed, legal assistance for migrants with unclaimed benefits or recruitment or labour cases. With support from the ILO, the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association has supported 50 internal migrants who had lost their jobs as garment workers to

produce face masks, 3,000 of which were recently donated to Yangon Regional Government.

In total, since 23 March, 80,027 migrants (34,260 women and 45,767 men) have received assistance from the CTUM and CSOs supported by the ILO. The organizations have also distributed information on COVID-19 prevention to communities receiving migrants home and to returning migrants.

The UN Core Group on Returning Migrants chaired by IOM involving ILO, UNHCR, WHO, UNICEF, OCHA, UNDP, WFP and other agencies, has met weekly online to coordinate responses to returning migrants, identify gaps and to have a coordinated response to requests from States and Regions governments and from the Union government. A regular situational update report is published.

Key considerations and recommendations going forward

- The Government of the Union of Myanmar is to be commended for acting quickly to organize the return of migrant workers, setting up over 7,000 quarantine facilities around the country and providing quarantine care to tens of thousands of people.
- Many of the quarantine facilities requisitioned schools, but with schools due to open in July, there is an urgent need to set up new quarantine centres which should follow MOHS and WHO health guidelines, as well as UN Women gender guidelines. If numbers of returning migrants increase or if there are more outbreaks of COVID-19, the quarantine facilities will need support to provide nutritional food and safe WASH facilities.
- Returning migrant workers should be included in the social assistance packages being provided to vulnerable workers in the informal sector. The current survey being conducted on returning migrants can be used to identify returning migrants in need of support.
- The pandemic has highlighted the need for a special fund to support the needs of returning migrants and migrants in need in countries of destination.
- Systems need to be put in place to recognize and accredit the skills of returning migrants.

- Labour exchange offices should be supported to increase their capacity to provide career counselling, job matching, and referral to other employment services.
- Returning migrants should be supported to set up SMEs (online trainings, seed funds).
- Programmes should be developed for the reintegration of migrants which promote social cohesion and tackle stigmatisation.
- Briefings should be provided to all Labour Exchange office on the recruitment and migration procedures for migrants re-migrating after COVID.
- MOEAF should be active in assisting migrants to re-migrate to their previous jobs without incurring extra costs.
- New labour markets overseas should be announced by MOLIP and carefully monitored to avoid opportunistic brokers taking advantage of people desperate to re-migrate for their livelihood.

Bilateral Agreements

- Considering the prevalence of COVID-19 in detention centres and dormitories in countries of destination, the Government of Myanmar should make urgent plans with countries of destination to ensure that migrants are not detained at this time for administrative immigration breaches; that all institutions or dormitories immediately implement WHO and the local ministries of health guidance for safety. Arrangements should be made bilaterally for migrants who develop symptoms to receive medical care in the country of destination and for all other migrants to be supported to return or to stay according to their voluntary decision.
- Future bilateral agreements on labour migration must include measures that protect migrants from conditions which pose a threat to the health of migrants.
- Many migrant workers are facing economic hardship after losing their jobs and cannot afford the cost of the journey home. In countries such as Qatar where it is the obligation of the employer to pay the return trip, the Embassy of Myanmar should file complaints on behalf of migrants whose employers refuse to pay. In other situations, financial support should be sought to support migrants to return home.

- Future bilateral agreements should be explicit on the responsibilities of governments, employers, employment agents, and other stakeholders regarding: support for migrants temporarily laid off due to economic crisis, pandemics, natural disasters etc.; portability of social security; cost of journeys home (at end of contracts and in emergency situations).
- Ensure that migrants who came home due to COVID-19 and whose work permits are valid can go back to their work in the country of destination without penalty or further payment, or can transfer to new employers. Where this is not possible, ensure that migrants are reimbursed work permit fees pro rata for the remaining period of their work permits.

ILO labour migration projects in Myanmar

Developing International and Internal Migration Governance (DIILM) funded by Livelihoods and Security Fund (LIFT) works with tripartite constituents in Myanmar to strengthen the legislative and policy framework governing labour migration and to improve social protection, skills recognition and access to complaints mechanism for migrant workers as well as promoting legal protection of domestic workers.

TRIANGLE in ASEAN is a partnership between the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the ILO. TRIANGLE in ASEAN delivers technical assistance and support with the overall goal of maximizing the contribution of labour migration to equitable, inclusive and stable growth in ASEAN.

Safe and Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region is part of the multi-year EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence against Women and Girls. Safe and Fair is implemented by the ILO and UN Women, led by the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

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