

# COVID-19: Impact on Cambodian migrant workers



Emergency sanitation and food supplies provided to migrant worker returnees in Roka Lour village, Kampong Cham province, through the TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (19 May 2020).

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International Labour Organization  
Country Office for Thailand, Cambodia and Lao PDR<sup>1</sup>

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## Statistics and data on movements

At the end of July 2020, Cambodia had reported a total of 233 confirmed cases of COVID-19, according to the Ministry of Health, with no confirmed deaths. Cases have been categorised as 'sporadic' according to the WHO,<sup>2</sup> and the Ministry of Health states that there is no community transmission of the virus.<sup>3</sup> All foreign travellers entering Cambodia are required to quarantine for 14 days, either self-quarantine if no fellow traveller tests positive, or in a state facility if positive tests are found in the arrival cohort. The Cambodian authorities recently lowered the required deposit to US\$2000<sup>4</sup> to be lodged by foreigners on arrival to facilitate the tests and potential quarantine costs<sup>5</sup> Returnee Cambodian citizens are required to quarantine under state supervision.

Despite low numbers of confirmed cases, the impact on Cambodia has been significant. A considerable number of migrants – estimated at around 100,000 in total - have returned to Cambodia. This reflects the economic impact COVID-19 has had on employment opportunities in neighbouring Thailand particularly, the top migrant work destination for Cambodian workers. With movement control measures in place in Thailand, border closures and restrictions on inter-provincial travel, it became very difficult for Cambodian migrant workers to return home. Despite this, according to IOM and WHO, as of June, it was reported that more than 90,000 Cambodian migrants crossed the border to return from Thailand.<sup>6</sup> While in early April border crossings were significant, estimated at 2000/day, these have dropped significantly since late April to 100-200.<sup>7</sup> Since June, crossings back into Thailand have been observed. Additional returns, including of students and migrant workers from other locations, bring the estimated total higher. Sex disaggregated data is not available.

This estimation is consistent with the increased outflow of migrant workers observed in Thailand. Beginning in April, Thailand saw a sharp increase in

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<sup>2</sup> WHO, [Situational Report 173](#), July 2020; WHO, [Coronavirus Dashboard](#), July 2020

<sup>3</sup> Som Kanika, "[No Community Transmission in Kingdom Says Ministry](#)", *Khmer Times*, 20 July 2020

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua reporters, "Cambodia Lowers Cash Deposit for Covid-19 service charges from foreign travellers to US\$2,000", *The Star*, 4 August 2020

<sup>5</sup> US Embassy, [COVID information](#), July 2020

<sup>6</sup> IOM Cambodia, [COVID-19 Response Situation Report 3](#), 27 May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> IOM Cambodia, [COVID-19 Response Situation Report 3](#), 27 May 2020.

migrant workers departing to return home to neighbouring countries, including Cambodia. A combination of factors motivated returns; including the partial lockdown of Bangkok and other provinces and the order by the Thai Interior Ministry to close border points with Cambodia taking effect on 23 March. Other factors included a fear of the COVID-19 pandemic worsening, migrant workers having lost their jobs or expecting to lose them, and the work permits of migrant workers under the Nationality Verification system being due to expire. Thailand has since extended the visa and work permits for migrant workers.<sup>8</sup> The Thai borders remain officially closed to Cambodia though there have been some discussions of reopening border for limited purposes designed to ease economic impacts.<sup>9</sup> In response to Viet Nam closing borders with Cambodia unilaterally, Cambodia also closed their border points.<sup>10</sup>

Cambodia is a major country of origin for migrants, with over 700,000 living abroad in 2019 (UNDESA). Most seek work outside of the country due to lack of sufficient employment opportunities available domestically and the significant wage differentials of overseas employment. The primary destination country for Cambodian migrant workers is Thailand, with workers commonly migrating into the fishing, agriculture, livestock, construction, manufacturing and service sectors, including hospitality and domestic work. After Thailand, the major destinations for Cambodian migrant workers are the Republic of Korea and Japan. There is limited information about Cambodian migrant workers in Korea, though there were reports of some arrivals defying mandatory quarantine, and communication from the Cambodian Government that migrant workers should remain in their destination.<sup>11</sup> The other major ASEAN destination is Malaysia, with migrant workers in similar sectors. The Cambodian Government has also facilitated returns from other destinations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bangkok Post Reporters, "[Migrant Workers in Limbo Can Stay Until November](#)", *Bangkok Post*, 17 April 2020

<sup>9</sup> Pattaya Mail Reporters, "[Thailand-Cambodia Border Reopening Proposed to Resume Bilateral Trade](#)", *Pattaya Mail*, 12 July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Sun Mesa, "[Viet Nam Shuttles Borders With Cambodia as Pandemic Spreads](#)", *Khmer Times*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Khuon Narim, "[A Cambodian Worker in South Korea Faces Deportation Over Quarantine Violation](#)", *Khmer Times*, 4 May 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Khan Chanvirak, "[Back Home Via Malaysia: 143 Cambodians Return from Russia and Egypt](#)", *Khmer Times*, 20 July 2020.

Only a small proportion of Cambodian migrant workers use regular channels to migrate due in part to the high cost, considerable time investment, and administrative complexities involved. According to a survey conducted by the ILO and IOM, less than a third of Cambodian migrants use regular channels to migrate, with the majority relying on social networks and unlicensed brokers (53 per cent) to go abroad.<sup>13</sup> Many of these workers have been able to regularise their immigration and work status in Thailand, but those with irregular status may avoid official borders on return, and hence actual return numbers are likely to be higher.

There are also reports of irregular migrant workers paying to cross borders to (re)migrate to Thailand.<sup>14</sup> While regular recruitment has been suspended since February, recruitment agency associations have been largely silent on the arrangements for migrant workers whose planned migrations have been stifled by the pandemic. At a recent meeting on migration challenges, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MOLVT) officials expressed that recruitment agency associations and their members were required to compensate trainees and workers who have been recruited and prepared for migration and are now unable to migrate.<sup>15</sup> Investments made by migrant workers' families are often considerable, and return of these funds paid would likely improve livelihood.

In July, the Government of Cambodia confirmed that it would not prevent the return of Cambodian citizens,<sup>16</sup> despite earlier indications to the contrary, and earlier statements that a health check would require returnees to be certified COVID-free. Some support for stranded migrants was provided by the Embassy in Malaysia, alleviating the desperate situation of out-of-work migrants seeking to return home.<sup>17</sup> Arrangements to repatriate Cambodian citizens are ongoing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ILO, "[Risks and Rewards: Outcomes of Labour Migration in South East Asia](#)" (2017).

<sup>14</sup> IOM Cambodia, "[COVID-19 Response Situation Report 3](#)", 27 May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> ILO staff attendance at a meeting 1:30pm-5:00pm, 24 July 2020. In the meeting, MOLVT reiterated the responsibility of recruitment agencies to compensate migrant workers who have already been trained but are delayed in departure.

<sup>16</sup> Khorn Savi, "[Kingdom Won't Ban Inbound Locals](#)" *Phnom Penh Post*, 21 July 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Niem Chheng, "[Migrant Workers Stranded in Malaysia Plead to Return](#)" *Phnom Penh Post*, 28 May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Phnom Penh Post/ANN, "[High Alert for COVID-19 as Students Return From Abroad](#)", *The Star*, 20 July 2020.

## Cambodian Government containment measures

The Cambodia Master Plan for COVID-19 launched in March 2020 to suppress the transmission of COVID-19 and to mitigate the health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic has been implemented and monitored by the National COVID-19 Committee. Despite early fears expressed by the Ministry of Health in April of the virus spreading, and several identified clusters, these have largely not been realised.<sup>19</sup> A national hotline for reporting suspected COVID-19 cases and seeking advice has been successful in providing information to the public on preventative measures and investigating reported cases.<sup>20</sup>

Initially reacting to COVID-19 with similar movement restrictions and school and business closures as seen elsewhere globally, in late April, the Cambodian Government lifted some travel, and movement restrictions. From mid-June, local businesses, restaurants, hotels, government ministries, NGOs and other entities opened and restarted business activities in Phnom Penh and in major provinces, like Siem Reap, Battambang, Kampong Som, Kampong Cham and Kampot. Inter-provincial travel is now possible throughout the country. On 24 June, the Cambodian Government set up a National Committee for Crisis and Emergency Response on COVID-19. This Committee launched a cash subsidy programme for vulnerable populations around the country with a budget of US\$25 million/month for an initial period of three months. This support is likely to also be accessible to family members of migrant workers, as long as they are able to obtain appropriate identification.<sup>21</sup> The Government is also reporting specific support to several provinces anticipating large numbers of migrant worker returns (Battambang, Bantay Meanchey and Siem Reap reportedly are home to 60 per cent of migrants to Thailand), in coordination with UN agencies.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Joshua Purushotman and Sangeetha Amarthalingam, "[COVID-19 at Alarming Rate Health Ministry Says](#)", *Phnom Penh Post*, 27 April 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Channé Suy Lan and Wendy Schultz-Henry (Guest writers, InSTEDD i-Lab), "[Cambodia's 115 Hotline: Successful COVID-19 Digital Response](#)" [www.ictworks.org](http://www.ictworks.org), 6 May 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Niem Chheng, "[More Than \\$232 million Handed Out to Poor](#)", *Phnom Penh Post*, 26 July 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Niem Chheng, "[More Than \\$232 million Handed Out to Poor](#)", *Phnom Penh Post*, 26 July 2020.





Emergency and food supplies were distributed to migrant returnees in Roka Lour village, Kampong Cham, with support from the Australian Government. Pictured, a woman migrant worker returnee (formerly an agricultural worker in Thailand) received food supplies, hand sanitizing materials, a poster related to COVID-19 risk and prevention factors and migration tips at an event facilitated by the ILO's TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme (19 May 2020)

From 8 April, all individuals, including migrant workers, entering Cambodia were required to go into a mandatory 14 day quarantine. For migrant workers, quarantine in designated facilities with state supervision was made mandatory. The Government also advised migrant workers in Thailand to remain in their destination workplace.<sup>23</sup> Around this time, the Government of Cambodia cancelled the upcoming Khmer New Year holidays (scheduled for mid-April) and suspended school operation (from 7 March) and tourist entry to the country (from 30 March). As of July, schools are not expected to open in 2020.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cambodian Government, Announcement 8 April 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Voun Dara, "[School Opening to be Delayed till Year's End](#)" *Phnom Penh Post*, 22 June 2020.

Quarantine facilities are either within designated hotels (for inbound foreigners able to lodge the monetary guarantee) or in facilities designated as quarantine, including schools and government buildings. The Ministry of Health established these facilities in line with WHO protocols and report strictly following physical distancing recommendations and hygiene within these centres. There is not clear data available to confirm the number of quarantine facilities but it is estimated at around 75, with facilities in the provincial capital in all provinces and more at district level. Quarantine centres in Phnom Penh, and in the border areas near Thailand (Battambang, Banteay Meanchay and Siem Reap) are recorded as the busiest. Support for these facilities has also been enabled through development partners. There is limited reliable information about conditions at the facilities and whether safe spaces for women migrant workers have been provided, with reports of one death of a migrant worker in a facility from a suspected drug overdose, but also of returnees being able to play games outside during isolation.<sup>25</sup>

The Government has increased healthcare and social protection funding and is securing medical and PPE supplies for health facilities and workers.<sup>26</sup> Over 2 million workers from government and private enterprise, including approximately 50,000 informal workers who have been covered for health expenses by the National Social Security Fund are still able to access free health care.<sup>27</sup> Any individual with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, regardless of their nationality, can access medical care, counselling, testing and required treatments, with costs covered by the Ministry of Health.<sup>28</sup>

For more information on the Government of Cambodia's general COVID-19 measures and guidance, see ILO's [COVID-19 and the world of work: Country policy responses](#) database.

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<sup>25</sup> Khorn Savi, "[Man in quarantine dies of 'overdose'](#)" *Phnom Penh Post*, 23 June 2020.

<sup>26</sup> ILO, [COVID-19 and the World Of Work: Country Policy Responses](#) (Cambodia).

<sup>27</sup> ILO, [COVID-19 and the World Of Work: Country Policy Responses](#) (Cambodia).

<sup>28</sup> ILO, [COVID-19 and the World Of Work: Country Policy Responses](#) (Cambodia).

## Issues faced by Cambodian migrant workers

The disruption caused by COVID-19 is having a huge impact on the regional economy, and this in turn, affecting migrant workers, their families and communities. ILO implementing partners report that migrant workers were among the first to lose their jobs as Thai employers downsized their work forces, and the Malaysian Government advised businesses to let go of migrant workers first.<sup>29</sup> The Migrant Working Group, a member based organization that advocates for the rights of migrant workers in Thailand, estimates that as many as 700,000 migrant workers — mostly in tourism, services and construction industries, all of which employ considerable numbers of Cambodian migrant workers — have lost their jobs since the restrictions began in late March.<sup>30</sup>

Many Cambodian households rely on the income from migrant work remittances to meet basic needs, including food and health expenses. With remittances projected to contract around 20 per cent as a result of COVID-19<sup>31</sup>, many migrant workers' families and communities are likely to face projected economic shortfalls and suffering. Remittances from all destinations are expected to decline significantly, but remittances from Korea and Japan have already been seen to decrease by around ten per cent.<sup>32</sup>

Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Council estimates that some 8.4 million workers are at risk of job loss, including 2.5 million in the tourism sector, 1.5 million in the industrial sector and 4.4 million in other parts of the service sector<sup>33</sup>. These sectors typically relies relatively heavy on migrant workers, but due to a combination of factors, including reports of concerns from employers that the outflow of migrant workers will result in labour shortages as

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<sup>29</sup> The Star Reporters, "[Human Resources Ministry releases FAQ during MCO period](#)", *The Star*, 20 March 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Migrant Working Group, "[A brief overview of the situation, laws and policies concerning migrant worker management during the Covid-19 outbreak](#)", 22 June 2020.

<sup>42</sup> World Bank, "[Press Release on the Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History](#)," 22 April 2020.  
[the Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History](#)," 22 April 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Sorn Sarath, "[Money Sent Back from South Korea Japan Declines](#)", *Khmer Times*, 14 July 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Bangkok Post, "[NESDC: 14.4m workers at risk](#)", 28 May 2020,  
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1925808/nescdc-14-4m-workers-at-risk>, [accessed 25 June 2020].



the economy is starting to open up again, it is not yet known how this will impact employment of migrant workers in the medium and long term. Migrant workers are still attempting to enter Thailand to gain jobs.<sup>34</sup>

In Malaysia, the economy is expected to contract by 2.61 per cent resulting in a loss of 951,000 jobs, out of which 68 per cent, or over 600,000 jobs, are low-skilled.<sup>35</sup> While no data is available yet, this might impact migrant workers who are frequently found in elementary occupations in Malaysia.<sup>36</sup>

The estimated 90,000 returned migrant workers are unlikely to be able to find jobs in what was already a challenging job market in Cambodia, as major sectors, including tourism and garments are significantly affected by the pandemic and related economic factors.<sup>37</sup> Both of these major sectors will be unlikely to be able to absorb returning migrant workers.

With increased financial pressure on households, returning women migrant workers are likely to be at greater risk of workplace, family and domestic violence.<sup>38</sup> Coordinated essential services for returned migrant workers should include referrals and responses to gender-based violence.

There is some evidence, based on research from May 2020, that women migrant worker returnees are finding employment at a much lower rate than men, and a higher proportion of women surveyed (three times as many men) indicated plans to (re)migrate.<sup>39</sup> While this might be reflective of sampling bias, a high proportion of men returnee migrant workers have experience in construction and such skills

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<sup>34</sup> Post Reporters, "[Migrants Seeking Work Held in Chachoengsao for Illegal Entry](#)", *Bangkok Post*, 12 June 2020; Pear Maneechote, "[54 Undocumented Cambodian Workers Detained at Thai-Cambodia Border](#)", *Thai Enquirer*, 29 May 2020; Wassayos Ngamkham and Penchan Charoensuthipan, "[Migrants struggle to return despite sealed borders](#)", *Bangkok Post*, 26 July 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER), "[The economic impacts of COVID-19](#)", 24 March 2020.

<sup>36</sup> [Malaysia Statistics Department, May 2020](#)

<sup>37</sup> ILO, [COVID-19 and the World Of Work: Country Policy Responses](#) (Cambodia).

<sup>38</sup> UN Women, "[Guidance for action: Addressing the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Asia and the Pacific for a gender-responsive recovery](#)", Action Brief, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Winrock, "[Situational Assessment of Labor Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge During COVID-19: Series Brief, June 2020](#)."

are in considerable demand in Cambodia. Entertainment venues, where many women migrant workers may have sought employment on return, have also been severely affected by closures.<sup>40</sup>

For Cambodian migrant workers who remained in destination countries, the situation is dire. Workers who have lost their jobs will find it difficult to find new jobs and retain regular migration status, have limited options to return home and limited access to government aid, especially for irregular migrant workers. In Thailand, the needs of migrant workers have been evident, with the Migrant Working Group reporting having received requests for help in terms of facemasks, hand sanitizers and dried food from as many as 200,000 migrant workers.<sup>41</sup>

Many of those that remain employed report employment related problems. A rapid assessment interviewing migrant workers in several countries, including Cambodians, during April-May 2020 finds that 32 per cent report work-related problems or abuses such as inability to refuse work during lockdown, being pushed to take unpaid leave, had their personal documents kept by employer, were threatened to have their contacts terminated, or other forms of harassment and violence.<sup>42</sup> A majority of the respondents in this assessment were women. An increase in migrant worker complaints is anticipated to result from this situation, and the ILO is assisting implementing partners to respond.

The rapid assessment also found that 33 per cent have insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) in the workplace, and at migrant worker residences. On a positive note, it seems efforts by the government, workers, employer and civil society organizations have been effective in disseminating information about COVID-19; 98 per cent of all respondents said they were well informed

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<sup>40</sup> Sokunthy Ros, "[Women Workers in Cambodia Under the COVID pandemic](#)", *Focus on the Global South*, 7 May 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Migrant Working Group, [A brief overview of the situation, laws and policies concerning migrant worker management during the Covid-19 outbreak](#), 22 June 2020.

<sup>42</sup> ILO, "[Experiences of ASEAN migrant workers during COVID-19: Rights at work, migration and quarantine during the pandemic, and re-migration plans](#)", 3 June 2020.

about prevention and symptoms, but slightly less aware of what to do in case of symptoms (women 74 per cent, men 67 per cent).<sup>43</sup>



An awareness raising event organized by Provincial Department of Labour and Vocational Training, in collaboration with local government officials and Provincial Health Department on COVID-19, discusses prevention, treatment and recovery through a poster demonstration in Bathey district, Kampong Cham (25 May 2020).

While migrant workers may be aware of the need to distance, these measures are practically impossible to implement where migrant workers live in cramped conditions or with limited airflow. In Thailand, according to a May report, the Department of Health of the Ministry of Public Health is working on reducing the potential for infections in migrant workers' housing, with an initial focus on the construction sector, a major employer of Cambodian migrant workers.<sup>44</sup> Disturbingly, there have been reports earlier of infections spreading within the Immigration Detention Centres in Thailand, where numerous Cambodian

<sup>43</sup> ILO, "[Experiences of ASEAN migrant workers during COVID-19: Rights at work, migration and quarantine during the pandemic, and re-migration plans](#)", 3 June 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Apinya Wipatayoti, "[Fears Over Packed Housing](#)", *Bangkok Post*, 1 May 2020.

migrant workers are detained.<sup>45</sup> In June 2020, Thai police arrested 2,498 foreign nationals in total, including 1,016 Cambodians, who had either overstayed their visas before the border closure or attempted to enter Thailand during its border closure.<sup>46</sup> A Thai Government spokesperson said all individuals would be treated if showing COVID-19 symptoms, regardless of their legal status on humanitarian grounds.<sup>47</sup>

In regular circumstances, women migrant workers are at a higher risk of discrimination and violence, as a result of multiple and intersecting identity factors that increase the likelihood of exploitation, abuse and lack of accountability of perpetrators. These identity factors include race, ethnicity, nationality, age, migration status, job type or other sex- or gender-associated characteristics<sup>48</sup>. Previous epidemics have seen increased rates of violence against women as freedom is restricted, economic tensions rise, and women are (further) isolated from support systems. Coordinated essential services for women migrant workers facing violence, harassment, abuse and exploitation is vital, in both destination and origin communities.

All workers, including migrants, in entertainment sectors have suffered from lengthy closures, and the informal nature of some occupations in the sector has excluded workers from government assistance.<sup>49</sup> For women or gender non-conforming migrant workers, there may be an additional risk of sexual and other harassment in accommodation,<sup>50</sup> and at times of lockdown and quarantine, the risk may increase.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Various, including Puttanee Kangkun, "[Abuse of Migrants Refugees Counterproductive](#)", *Bangkok Post*, 28 May 2020; Sunai Phasuk, "[Thailand Should Free Detained Migrants Amid Pandemic](#)" Human Rights Watch, 8 May 2020; and (numerous) "[Call for the Release of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Immigration Detention Centers in Thailand for protection against COVID-19: Joint Letter to United States Ambassador to Thailand](#)" 22 May 2020.

<sup>46</sup> [New TV](#) (Thai language), viewed 30 June 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Cod Satrusayang, "[Thailand discovers 53 new coronavirus cases; majority of cases from migrant detention center prompting fears of Singapore scenario](#)", *Thai Enquirer*, 2 April 2020.

<sup>48</sup> UN Women, "[Guidance for action: Addressing the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Asia and the Pacific for a gender-responsive recovery](#)", Action Brief, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Thomson Reuters Foundation, "[Migrant Sex Workers Fear for the Future](#)", *Bangkok Post*, 30 June 2020.

<sup>50</sup> ILO, [High rise, low pay: Experiences of migrant women in the Thai construction sector](#), (2016).

<sup>51</sup> UN Women, [A guide for action to stem increasing violence against women amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific](#), Action Brief, 2020.



Many domestic workers have been dismissed by employers of fear for bringing COVID-19 into the home where they work, while those that have continued to work have reported not being given a day off and having to work long hours for no extra pay. Increased workloads include more time spent maintaining cleanliness and hygiene levels, including increased chemical use, and provision of additional care, especially to children.



In Stueng Trang district, Char commune, returned migrant workers (including some ethnic minority Cham Muslim Cambodians) from Thailand were provided food supplies, hand sanitizer materials and other materials (23 May 2020).



## Snapshot of responses by the ILO in Cambodia

Through the TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme, since April 2020, humanitarian emergency support has been provided to returning migrant workers through Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) and implementing partners, including the Provincial Departments of Labour and Vocational Training in four provinces (Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Battambang and Kampot), civil society organisations and National Employment Authority offices. These services have included adapting and sharing COVID-19 communication materials, sharing information about skills training and employment services, providing returned migrant workers support during the mandatory quarantine period and food and sanitation item distribution. Through two MRCs, data on returning migrant workers was also collected to contribute to the *Experiences of ASEAN migrant workers during COVID-19: Rights at work, migration and quarantine during the pandemic, and re-migration plans* report released in early June.<sup>52</sup> The ILO joint programme with UN Women, *Safe and Fair: Realizing Women Migrant Workers Rights and Opportunities* also supports MRCs, including a mobile MRC soon to be operationalised for outreach to women migrant workers.

All Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) supported by the ILO in five provinces remained open due to the increased needs to support returning migrant workers. MRC staff applied protective measures and used remote counselling when possible through phone hotlines. Outreach activities were partially scaled down or altered to focus on COVID-19 prevention. MRCs in Battambang and Kampot provinces were responding to relatively high rates of local COVID-19 infections, consistent with being major out-migration provinces. From July, all MRCs are expected to fully resume activities.

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<sup>52</sup> ILO, "[\*Experiences of ASEAN migrant workers during COVID-19: Rights at work, migration and quarantine during the pandemic, and re-migration plans\*](#)", 3 June 2020.



Radio programme on COVID-19 awareness raising for the public and migrant worker returnees. A live 'call-in' programme organized by a government-run radio station based in Kampong Cham focussed on prevention of COVID-19 and related risks. Ms Khiev Socheath, Head of the Employment and Manpower Office at the Provincial Department of Labour and Vocational Training, Mr Tol Meng, Deputy Head of Anti-Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Unit at the Provincial police commissariat answered questions as the programme was moderated by Mr Khen Meng (18 June 2020).

The ILO has participated in the broader UN Country Team efforts that focussed on coordinating UN support to the Cambodian Government in designing policy and programme responses and ensuring these are informed by rigorous assessment of the economic and social impact of COVID-19. Within this team, the ILO has advocated for inclusion of returned migrant workers in interventions.

The ILO is also providing support through the Senior Social Protection Technical Specialist to draft the 'Protecting People' chapter on the UN framework for COVID-19 funding, to ensure that social protection is central in the Cambodian Government response and creates a system that can better protect Cambodian citizens from similar health and economic shocks in future.

The ILO has also advocated for specific protections for returned migrant workers, including addressing stigma, return and reintegration and financial support. The ILO's work through the TRIANGLE in ASEAN and Safe and Fair programmes will

leverage the opportunities that this situation offers to shift the paradigm of recruitment for labour migration, aiming towards fairer recruitment more closely aligned with international standards, including a reduction or elimination of fees borne by migrant workers, and for employers to bare the burden of any additional medical checks required by migration systems arising from COVID-19.

Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) have launched a mobile phone hotline to provide information to workers in the garment and footwear, travel goods and bag sectors about preventing the spread of COVID-19, and a series of resources accessible at their website, including on training on COVID-19 and reducing transmission risks on collective transport.<sup>53</sup>

The ILO has developed numerous resources and tools on migration and COVID-19, including:

- [Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Recommendations for policy-makers and constituents](#)
- [Experiences of ASEAN migrant workers during COVID-19: Rights at work, migration and quarantine during the pandemic, and re-migration plans](#)
- [COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN \(with UN Women\)](#)
- [Impact on migrant workers and country response in Malaysia](#)
- [Impact on migrant workers and country response in Myanmar](#)
- [Impact on migrant workers and country response in Thailand](#)

Other resources relevant to Cambodian migrant workers and employers include:

- [Safe return to work: Guide for employers on COVID-19 prevention](#)
- [COVID-19 and the world of work: Country policy responses](#)
- [ILO Standards and COVID-19 \(coronavirus\): FAQ](#)
- [An employers' guide on managing your workplace during COVID-19;](#)
- [Social protection responses to the Covid-19 crisis: Country responses in Asia and the Pacific](#)
- [COVID-19 and public emergency services](#)

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<sup>53</sup> [Better Factories Cambodia](#)

IOM has developed a set of information sheets, policy notes and tools for governments, employers, and migrant workers. These resources are available on the [IOM COVID-19 Response](#) portal. Some of the resources include:

- [COVID-19 Flash Update: Government Guidance Affecting Migrant Workers and their Employers in Thailand and Neighbouring Countries](#)
- [Rapid assessment Round 2: COVID-19 related vulnerabilities and perceptions of non-Thai populations in Thailand](#)
- [COVID-19: Guidance for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis](#)
- [Tips for migrant workers whose job is affected by COVID-19](#), (available in English, Lao, Khmer, Myanmar and Thai)
- [COVID-19 Flash Update: Government Guidance Affecting Migrant Workers and their Employers in Thailand and Neighbouring Countries](#),
- [Tips for employers of domestic workers during COVID-19](#), (available in English and Thai).

## Key considerations and recommendations

Migrant workers – both those who remain in countries of destination and those who return to Cambodia - are among the most vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic for numerous reasons, with men and women facing specific challenges. To address these issues, the ILO suggests the following recommendations:

### In Cambodia and in cooperation with destination countries

- The Government should consider **including guidelines and minimum requirements for migrant workers housing and dormitory facilities** into Memoranda of Understanding with destination countries and/or standard contracts for migrant workers, with due consideration to the needs of women migrant workers. Inspection of housing facilities needs to be undertaken to ensure that there are structures in place that allow proper social distancing and hygiene efforts. Recent developments including enhancing dormitory management practices and improved standards for migrant workers housing in Singapore could be considered.<sup>54</sup> The Cambodian Government could advocate for the scope of the Thai Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Act, B.E. 2554 (2011) to be expanded to cover work-related places, especially worker's accommodation provided by the employer.
- **Prevent and combat spread of COVID-19 in immigration facilities, quarantine centres and during movement by large groups of migrant workers** by putting in place proper hygiene and social distancing standards including avoiding overcrowding in Cambodian Government facilities and services. The Government should also advocate with governments in countries of destination to request they consider suspending detentions for Cambodian migrant workers when such standards cannot be ensured.
- In view of potential labour shortages as destination economies are beginning to open up, the Cambodian Government should advocate with

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<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Manpower, Singapore: "[Joint MND-MOM Media Release on New Dormitories with Improved Standards for Migrant Workers](#)", 1 June 2020.



destination governments to **ensure that currently unemployed migrant workers are given access to unemployment schemes and other social protection benefits** making it possible for them to remain in destination safely. The Cambodian Government could advocate for extensions to the grace period afforded to migrant workers to allow them to find new employment before work permits expire, including for domestic workers.

- Given that a large number of migrant workers returned home at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Cambodian Government should consider and advocate for **waiving any additional visa or work permit fees, including re-entry visa fees for returning migrant workers** as a way to lessen financial burdens on migrant workers as the destination economies open up. This will also increase the incentives for regular migration. Recruitment agencies should be encouraged to re-send interested migrant workers who were forced to return home at no additional cost. The Government should consider **utilising the guarantee deposit collected from recruitment agencies** at the time of licensing to support any additional costs incurred.
- All important policy steps should be adequately communicated to all **women and men migrant workers**, including tailoring information sharing to **groups that face specific challenges** in accessing and assessing credible information.
- The Government of Cambodia should continue to ensure **all statistics are sex disaggregated** so that it can be used effectively in policy and program decisions.
- Continue to run **public information campaigns targeting migrant workers and include information on the specific needs of women** on matters relating to COVID-19 in appropriate languages. The campaigns should cover issues such as how to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, signs of infection and who to contact for assistance, how to social distance and isolate, information on immigration updates, and border closures. Information about emergency support including hotlines, shelters and support in case of violence and harassment available for migrants in destination countries should also be shared.
- Ensure that in cases of violence, **women migrant workers' needs** - including being supported by **trained women officials** - is respected.

- Through Embassies and overseas missions, and in coordination with destination country services, ensure that all migrant workers, including irregular migrant workers, have **access to legal remedies and compensation** for unfair treatment, exploitation or abuse and interpretive services to assist in their access to justice in such cases.
- Support **Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs)** to provide legal assistance to returned migrant workers and link to relevant services in destination countries.
- Ensure that the **complaints and dispute resolution mechanism** is accessible and operational to support migrant workers' claims with specific attention to (women) migrant workers in informal sectors.
- Advocate for the swift return of all Cambodian **immigration detainees** to reduce the chance of further COVID-19 transmission in these facilities.

#### **In destination countries<sup>55</sup>**

- Decisions to **extend the deadline for renewals of work permits and visas** for migrant workers in destination workplaces have taken place, for instance in Thailand and are indeed welcome. Further, immigration enforcement against irregular workers at this time should take into account and give priority to health factors.<sup>56</sup>
- Consider to **release all immigration detainees** or have **alternatives to detention** as these establishments are vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission among detainees, staff and the broader community.
- Ensure that employers of migrant workers in essential services, including domestic work, **identify and mitigate all risks of exposure** arising from COVID-19.
- **Coordinate with origin countries on the return of migrant workers**, regarding screening, quarantining and limiting the numbers allowed to cross land borders at any one time, with due responsiveness to gender issues during this process.
- Disseminate **occupational health and safety guidelines** in migrant languages for both employers and workers. These should take needs of

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<sup>55</sup> These recommendations draw from the ILO country notes prepared for Malaysia and Thailand.

<sup>56</sup> ILO, "[COVID-19: Impact on migrant workers and country response in Malaysia](#)", 8 May 2020

specific occupations such as domestic work, construction, service sector, those involved in home-delivery etc. into consideration.

- Make sure that **dismissals of migrant workers are not made on discriminatory grounds**. Dismissals should only be made in cases when the need is genuine and other alternatives (such as reducing work hours, limiting or restricting the hiring of new employees, limiting overtime, limiting weekly or general work holidays, reducing workforce wages and implementing temporary lay-offs or furloughs) have been exhausted.
- Ensure that **migrant workers are treated equally** in all health protection measures. For example, in case of confirmed or suspected infection, migrant workers, regardless of their migration status, should have **access to free COVID-19 testing and treatment, quarantine facilities that permit social distancing**. Such facilities should cater to the needs of different migrant workers, including ensuring safe spaces for women migrant workers, and appropriate privacy, hygiene and sanitation provisions.
- Extend **social protection and stimulus measures** adopted to counter economic impacts of COVID-19 to cover all migrant workers, including those working in informal sectors.
- Ensure that all migrant workers, including those who do not have regular immigration status, who face loss of work and income have access to humanitarian assistance and emergency relief, including **food, shelter and provision of personal protective equipment such as masks and hand sanitisers**. The specific needs of women in these circumstances should be considered and responded to.
- Ensure that those that lose their jobs **receive their due wages, social security and other benefits** and that personal documents are returned.
- **Ensure that migrant workers who wish to return to their country are allowed to do so, without undue costs.**

## **ILO labour migration projects in Cambodia**

**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 in collaboration with UNODC, led by the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. Safe and Fair is implemented with the overriding objective of ensuring that labour migration is safe and fair for all women in the ASEAN region