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

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International Labour Organization
Country Office for Thailand, Cambodia and Lao PDR

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Statistics and data on movements

As of 16 April 2020, Thailand has reported 2,672 COVID-19 infections, of those 1,411 are male, 1,173 are women and 59 are unknown. A total of 37,462 persons are under investigation and 46 people have died.\(^1\)

The partial lockdown of Bangkok and order by the Thai Interior Ministry to close 18 border points taking effect on 23 March triggered an outflow of migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. While the Thai government has not made official statistics available, reports from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar indicate that at least 260,000 migrant workers have returned to these countries over the past two-three weeks, many from Thailand (including more than 50,000 to Cambodia\(^ii\), 60,000 to Lao People's Democratic Republic\(^iii\) and another 150,000 to Myanmar\(^iv\)).

While these figures might be underestimates as many returnees cross through unofficial border points, the majority of all migrant workers remain in Thailand due to border closures. As of December 2019, there were 2,788,316 registered migrant workers in Thailand\(^v\) and an unknown, number of undocumented migrant workers.

Government containment measures

In order to prevent further spread of COVID-19, the Governor of Bangkok introduced a wide-ranging business closure on 21 March 2020. On 26 March, the Prime Minister announced an emergency decree to control the pandemic. Subsequently, all schools, universities, malls, markets, dine-in restaurants, salons, spas, gyms, massage parlours, theme parks, sports venues, conference halls, cinemas and theatres were closed until further notice. Supermarkets, fresh food markets and restaurants offering takeaway food remain open. Preventive measures also include postponing the Songkran Holiday, a major national holiday, and allowing provincial governors to close any gathering spaces and closely regulate travel.\(^vi\)
Travel between provinces is prohibited unless deemed essential and physical distancing practices have been promoted. On 3 April 2020, the Prime Minister imposed a nationwide curfew from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. aiming to control and limit public movement and the spreading of the virus.

International arrivals have been tightly restricted, requiring medical clearances prior to departure and 14-day self-isolation after arrival. On 4 April, Thailand put in place a ban on inbound passenger flights until 18 April, a ban that was subsequently extended until 30 April⁹.

**Problems faced by women and men migrant workers**

The economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 are having a huge impact on the Thai economy as tourist figures and merchandise exports have been severely affected by the pandemic, the slowdown of trading partner economies, and supply chain disruptions in many countries. According to the Bank of Thailand's latest data release, Thailand's GDP could contract by 5.3 per cent in 2020, a sharp lowering from its 2.8 per cent previous projections in December.⁸ Following global patterns, the decline of the economy will likely take a heavy toll on employment. The Thai Chamber of Commerce estimates that about 7 million jobs have already been lost, and the figure is likely to reach 10 million if the pandemic measure continue for 2-3 month⁹. The labour force in Thailand was just below 39 million in 2019¹.

Governments of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia have urged migrant workers to avoid travelling back to their countries of origin at this time. Despite this, many migrant workers have returned home as for many, remaining in Thailand means no job, no income, no access to health care and risk of food shortages and homelessness.

While there are no official figures available yet, ILO implementing partners indicate that migrant workers are among the first to lose their jobs as employers
are downsizing their work forces. There are reports that in some cases, employers are confiscating migrant workers’ personal documents, while others are continuing to work without being paid. While migrant workers who are losing their jobs are allowed to stay in Thailand for an additional 30 days to seek new employment, few are reportedly able to find new jobs.

Among those that are still employed, there are some reports that migrant workers are excluded from the distribution of PPE (masks and hand sanitizer) at the workplace level. While there are exceptions, information about COVID-19 and how to protect against contamination is mostly made available in Thai, excluding many migrant workers from this critical information. Further, distancing measures are difficult to implement where migrant workers are living in cramped dormitories and other housing facilities with overall poor sanitary conditions.

Migrant workers in certain occupations face heightened risk. The partial lockdown exempts construction, a sector heavily dependent on migrant workers. Many migrants are heading to work on high-rise buildings and apartment complexes and building sites, with only a few wearing face masks or bandanas around their nose and mouth. Some 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 of not being given a day off and having to work long hours for no extra pay. Workers in entertainment and retail are also losing jobs due to the requirement to shut down such businesses during this period.

While migrant workers have the same right to access social security including health care and paid sick leave as Thai workers, in reality many are excluded. This includes migrants working in the informal sectors (including domestic work, agriculture, and fishing), regular workers whose employers for various reasons have not enrolled them in the social security system, and undocumented migrant workers. These groups have limited access to COVID-19 testing and treatment and might not seek medical support due to costs involved, and fear of the repercussions of engaging with authorities, including deportation for those in irregular status. Pregnant women migrants within these groups may not be able
to access necessary medical care, and women if they face violence, may not be able to access essential health and social services. Further, de facto, there are barriers for formal sector workers in accessing unemployment insurance.

Previous epidemics globally have seen increased rates of violence against women as freedom is restricted, economic tensions are felt, and women are isolated from support systems. While official data is not available, critical services for women workers and especially women migrant workers facing violence is important.

Ahead of the Emergency Decree coming into effect on 23 March, all land borders were closed, but many have since reopened, and some closed again in response to the number of migrants attempting to cross. 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.

The movement of migrant workers returning to their communities of origin and across the borders to Myanmar, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Cambodia has created significant pressure on front line immigration officials and increases the risks of new clusters of people infected with COVID-19. Meanwhile, detention of migrants in an irregular situation continues, raising concerns about their health within the Immigration Detention Centres.

Migrants who have left Thailand and returned to their countries of origin also face challenges. Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao People’s Democratic Republic are quarantining migrant returnees. Initially this was done as self-regulated home quarantine but more recently at government or community-based quarantine centres close to their homes. These centres have limited capacity, and there is not enough information available for migrant workers about these centres and how they are operated. In some cases, returnees are met by fear from their community members which may fuel stigmatization and discrimination.
Responses by governments to assist migrant workers

Importantly, on 8 April, the Ministry of Labour announced that MOU migrant workers and migrant workers holding valid border passes, whose documents were to expire on 31 March, are allowed to continue working until 30 April 2020\textsuperscript{xvii}. The cabinet approved its resolution to extend the deadline of the renewal of work permit for the remaining of 555,993 migrant workers (from 1,266,351 eligible migrant workers) who have not completed the process from 30 June to 30 November 2020.\textsuperscript{xviii} The immigration office also announced visa relief measures for all non-nationals, some of which also applies to migrant workers. This includes automatic visa exemption from 26 March to 30 April, 90 days report exemption until further notice, and automatic stay for border pass holders until the re-opening of the borders to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar\textsuperscript{xxix}.

The government has also announced COVID-19 related relief measures in case of temporary closure of business. Workers, including migrants, who have paid social security contribution for more than 6 months are eligible for unemployment benefits under the Social Security Fund. These workers are entitled to 62 per cent of their daily wages for a maximum of 90 days.\textsuperscript{xx} Only those who are contributing under Section 33 of the Social Security Act are eligible, i.e. those employed in formal sectors. Hence, migrant workers employed in domestic work, agriculture and fishing are not eligible for unemployment benefits.

In case of contract termination, workers, including migrant workers whose period of employment is no less than 120 days are entitled to severance pay. Similar to the case of unemployment benefits under temporary closures, this applies only to workers in the formal sectors. In addition to severance pay, workers (including domestic workers) are under certain conditions entitled to receiving their next month's salary and other pending unpaid leave entitlements. Under certain conditions, workers can also be compensated for unfair dismissal.
The Royal Thai Government has initiated a number of policy responses to COVID-19. The Royal Thai Government set up the “COVID-19 Epidemic Management Centre” which is chaired by the Prime Minister on 12 March 2020. This is to ensure integrated and unified command since the evolving pandemic situation requires fast and prompt responses. Responses, up to date, are categorised into three phases. The government has already introduced two economic stimulus and social protection packages to assist business and individuals for April – June 2020. On 3 April, the Cabinet approved the launch of the third package, worth THB 1.68 trillion, covering the period from May to July 2020. This third package aims to provide comprehensive and continued assistance for all people in the country.

Measures to assist affected workers, including enhanced social security benefits, tax breaks, and other actions, have been introduced. This includes the introduction of personal emergency loans between THB10,000-50,000 with low interest, and financial assistance (cash transfers) of THB5,000 per month for three months to 9 million temporary and self-employed workers. Other economic stimulus packages covers expansion of unemployment benefits, soft loans to the tourism industry, increase of health insurance premium deductions, subsidised water and electricity etc. For more information on the government of Thailand’s general COVID-19 measures and guidance, see ILO’s COVID-19 and the world of work: Country policy responses database.

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

MAP Foundation, HomeNet and the Human Right and Development Foundation (HRDF) (civil society organisations) are running Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) in Chiang Mai, Bangkok and Mae Sot respectively. These MRCs are supported by the ILO and are providing information to migrant workers and their communities on a range of issues, including COVID-19. Importantly, the MRCs also provide legal assistance to migrant workers suffering labour rights violations. In partnership with the Raks Thai Foundation, ILO is conducting trainings and disseminating COVID-19 information and PPE among Cambodian
migrant workers, particularly women, in Rayong and Chonburi. Provision has been made for masks, hand sanitizer and health communications materials. Through these and other community based partners, ILO is collecting information to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers.

The Migrant Working Group (MWG) and the World Health Organization (WHO) collaborated on training of volunteers to provide information on COVID-19 to migrant communities.

The ILO is developing support together with its partners to meet the immediate needs of women and men migrant workers collecting information on types of COVID-19 related problems faced by migrant workers, supporting provision of essential services as feasible and assistance provided.

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

- 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

IOM has developed a set of tools for governments, employers, and migrant workers as follows:

- 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 the COVID-19 Pandemic, 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 the COVID-19 Pandemic, available in English and Thai
Key considerations and recommendations going forward

Migrant workers are among the most vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic for numerous reasons as elaborated above. To address these issues, the ILO suggests the following recommendations:

- The ILO welcomes the decision to extend the deadline for renewals of work permits and visas for certain groups of migrant workers (those who underwent national verification) until 30 November 2020. Similar consideration should be given those who entered Thailand under the MOU mechanism and migrant workers holding valid border passes who’s documents now expires 30 April, granting them prolonged right to stay and permit to work.

- Develop and launch public information campaigns targeting migrant workers and include information on the specific needs of women on matters relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in appropriate migrant languages. The campaigns should cover issues such as how to stop the spread of COVID-19, signs of infection and who to contact for help, how to social distance and self-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 should also be made available.

- Ensure that employers of migrant workers in essential services identify and mitigate all risks of exposure arising from COVID-19.

- Urgently develop occupational health and safety guidelines in Thai and migrant languages for both employers and workers. These should take needs of specific occupations such as domestic workers, construction, 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 have been exhausted such as reducing work hours, limiting or restricting the hiring of new employees,
limiting overtime, limiting weekly or general work holidays, reducing workforce wages, implementing temporary lay-offs.

- Develop mechanisms to **support migrant workers who have lost their jobs due to financial implications of the COVID-19 crisis to find new employment**. Consider extending the 30 days grace period allowed to find new employment before work permit expires.
- Ensure that those that lose their jobs **receive their salaries, social security and other benefits** due to them, and that personal documents are returned.
- Ensure that all migrant workers, including irregular migrant workers, should have **access to legal remedies and compensation** for unfair treatment, and interpretive services to assist in their access to justice in these cases. Ensure in cases of violence, women migrant workers specific needs including being supported by women officials is respected. The Migrant Workers Assistance Centres operated by the Ministry of Labour may take the lead in this regard.
- It is important 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**, where such facilities are available for other groups. 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, to minimize further spread.
- 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.
Consider to release all immigration detainees as these establishments often are overcrowded, have poor sanitation and healthcare facilitates which make them vulnerable to spread of COVID-19.

Countries of origin to coordinate with Thailand on the return of migrants regarding screening, quarantining, and limiting the numbers allowed to cross the border at a time. Migrant workers who wish to return to their country, should be allowed to do so.

ILO labour migration projects in Thailand

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.
End notes:


2 Data retrieved by ILO staff from the Ministry of Labour and Vocation Training, Cambodia. According to the source, more than 50,000 migrant workers have returned home since the COVID-19 outbreak. The data is of 7 April 2020.

3 Data retrieved by ILO staff from Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Lao PDR. According to the source, some 61,121 migrant workers returned to Lao PDR during 11-31 March as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.


5 Ministry of Labour, 2019


14 Ibid


