Mixed Migration Centre

Quarterly Mixed Migration Update:
Asia

This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers Southern and Southeast Asia. The core countries of focus for this region are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand and Australia. Depending on the quarterly trends and migration-related updates, more attention may be given to any of the countries over the rest.

The QMMUs offer a quarterly update on new trends and dynamics related to mixed migration and relevant policy developments in the region. These updates are based on a compilation of a wide range of secondary (data) sources, brought together within a regional framework and applying a mixed migration analytical lens. Similar QMMUs are available for all MMC regions.

The Mixed Migration Centre is a global network consisting of seven regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. For more information on the MMC, the QMMUs from other regions and contact details of regional MMC teams, visit mixedmigration.org and follow us at @Mixed_Migration

MMC's understanding of mixed migration

"Mixed migration" refers to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly, and wholly, or partially, assisted by migrant smugglers.

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Quarter 2 - 2020

Key Updates

- **Rising concerns over COVID-19 cases in refugee camps, shelters, and immigration detention facilities across the region**: The first COVID-19 cases were detected in a refugee camp in the Cox's Bazar region and in a refugee shelter in Indonesia, where overcrowding and limited sanitation supplies exacerbate the likelihood of an outbreak. Numerous cases were also recorded in detentions centers in Thailand and Malaysia.

- **Rising xenophobia and abuse against Afghans in Iran:** In May, 17 Afghans were murdered by Iranian border guards while attempting to enter Iran irregularly from Herat. This incident occurred amid rising abuse of Afghans across Iran, increased arrests and deportations of undocumented Afghans, and the murder of three Afghans in central Yazd province.

- **Returning migrant workers face discrimination and unsafe quarantine conditions:** As hundreds of thousands of migrants return to their homelands due to job loss amid widespread lockdowns, they have been subject to unsafe quarantine conditions and met with mistrust and stigma due to fears of COVID-19 transmission.

- **Fears border closures could increase instances of exploitation and trafficking**: With borders closed and regular avenues of recruitment temporarily suspended, there are growing concerns over the possibility of rising incidents of debt bondage, trafficking, and exploitation as migrants seek employment opportunities abroad.

- **Immigration crackdowns in Malaysia:** Amid rising xenophobia, Malaysian authorities have conducted a series of police raids, resulting in the arrest and detention of refugees and migrants. Meanwhile, Malaysia has pushed back several boats carrying hundreds of Rohingya trying to seek protection.

- **Continued concerns over immigration detention conditions in Australia:** Numerous protests have been held in Melbourne and Sydney, protesting overcrowding and high-risk conditions in immigration detention facilities. A chronically ill refugee held in an immigration detention facility has launched a landmark case in the high court, seeking his release to protect him from contracting COVID-19.

Regional Overview

Afghanistan: Rising xenophobia and abuse of Afghans in Iran has fueled public anger and protests

Bangladesh: 50 cases and 5 fatalities as COVID-19 confirmed in Cox's Bazar refugee camps

Myanmar: The border with Bangladesh remains closed, with reports of thousands of Rohingya stranded, unable to seek asylum and reunite with family already in Bangladesh

Malaysia: Escalating xenophobia against refugees and migrants underpins concerning increases in arrests, detention, and deportations

Indonesia: Nearly 100 Rohingya refugees rescued off the coast of Aceh by residents in defiance of Indonesian authorities

Australia: Continued concerns over immigration detention conditions due to overcrowding and lack of adequate sanitation supplies

*Information on the map relates to selected updates and does not represent all mixed migration flows within and out of Asia.

Mixed Migration Regional Updates

COVID-19 cases confirmed in refugee camps across the region

This quarter saw the first COVID-19 cases recorded in several refugee camps across Asia, sparking fears outbreaks could lead to further crises for those already in vulnerable situations.

In Bangladesh, the first COVID-19 case was detected in May in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar district. By 25 June, 50 cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in the refugee camps, along with 5 fatalities. Despite this, only 400 tests were carried out in the camps as of mid-June, due to limited testing capacity. In addition, low numbers of residents have attended health facilities due to fears of being isolated in quarantine, and a lack of information due to ongoing internet and phone restrictions, further hampering testing efforts.

In Indonesia, on 19 May, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in a refugee shelter in Makassar. Over 8,200 refugees and people seeking asylum, including children, currently live in shelters in Indonesia. Given overcrowded conditions and limited sanitation supplies in the shelters, concerns have been mounting of a widespread COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, a lack of access to adequate health care facilities for refugees in Indonesia has only compounded these concerns further.

COVID-19 cases increase in overcrowded detention centers amidst continued arrests and raids

Numerous COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in detention centers in Thailand where overcrowded and unhygienic conditions are routine, making social distancing and preventative measures impossible. The spike in cases has prompted renewed calls for increased protection of people seeking asylum and refugees in Thailand, including their urgent release into the community.

Similarly, in Malaysian detention centers, the number of COVID-19 cases have been rising amid a concerning increase in arrests and detention. On 22 May, some 35 cases were detected at a detention center near Kuala Lumpur. By 19 June, the number of cases had surged to 776 across Malaysia's detention sites. During the quarter, Malaysian police conducted raids arresting more than 2,000 undocumented refugees and migrants, claiming the move was to stop the spread of COVID-19. However, instead, it has served to further the spread of the virus through the overcrowded facilities and has been met by widespread international concern.

Immigration detention conditions prompt court action and protests in Australia

Protests have continued in Australia over concerns for people in immigration detention, with peak medical bodies calling for the urgent release of those detained in order to meet human rights obligations and reduce the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks. In Melbourne, protests continued this quarter over the crowded and inadequate conditions of accommodation housing refugees and people seeking asylum, highlighting a lack of personal hygiene supplies and the inability to adequality physically distance. Meanwhile, in Sydney, three men detained in Villawood Immigration Detention Centre were arrested for protesting over concerns not enough had been done to stop a potential outbreak of coronavirus in the facility.

In April, a chronically ill refugee held in Australian immigration detention launched a case in the high court, seeking his release to protect him from contracting COVID-19. The landmark case is being seen as a test case for others held in detention.

Concerns over the living conditions of migrant workers across Asia

The COVID-19 crisis has further exposed the harsh conditions faced by migrant workers across Asia, with particular concerns over their living standards and access to health care.

By late April, Singapore reported 10,000 COVID-19 cases, the majority of which could be linked to migrant workers, many of whom were living in close-quarter dormitories, with inadequate access to sanitation and limited capacity to physically distance. Following the increase in cases, the Singapore government announced plans to improve the living conditions of migrant workers, including planning for the additional housing for 60,000 migrant workers and calling for greater public support towards migrant workers.

While Taiwan has avoided a largescale outbreak, the crisis has highlighted the cramped, unsafe and exploitative living conditions of migrant workers. Concerns have arisen over instances of employers detaining employees for months throughout lockdown, impinging on migrant workers' freedoms and movement. Taiwan is currently hosting more than 700,000 migrant workers primarily from Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Widespread job loss for millions of migrant workers across Asia

The COVID-19 pandemic has put millions across Asia, including migrants, out of work. On 9 April, the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights called for states to take action to protect migrant workers and integrate them into national response plans as well as national COVID-19 stimulus and compensation packages.

In Thailand, for instance, the government has offered a six-month financial support package worth USD 920 to Thai citizens who have lost income due to COVID-19. However, the scheme does not cover the 4 million migrant workers who have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and layoffs. Without employment, migrant workers in Thailand also risk losing their legal status as they cannot renew their work permits.

Similarly, tens of thousands of migrant workers, mostly from Asia, have lost their jobs across the Gulf as a result of the pandemic. Reports of the ongoing systematic exploitation of migrant workers in Gulf countries have only increased in the face of COVID-19. The six Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, host nearly 23 million migrant workers, mostly employed in construction, hospitality, retail, and travel sectors.

Meanwhile, 300,000 – 400,000 Filipino migrant workers have been estimated to have lost their jobs amid the pandemic. The Philippines has one of the largest diasporas in the work with an estimated 10 million citizens living abroad, across Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the US. Since the pandemic erupted, an estimated 70,000 have been repatriated to date, with others remaining stranded, or by choice, in their host countries.

The rapid increase in unemployment amid the global economic downturn highlights the urgent need for migrant workers to be integrated into national response plans across the region and offered safe and humane repatriation options where desired.

Returning migrants face unsafe quarantine practices and stigma

As countries across the world went into lockdown in an effort to contain COVID-19, many migrant workers returned to their homelands in the face of widespread job loss and fears over the virus. Across the region, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers made arduous journeys home, including Bangladeshis repatriated from Malaysia, and tens of thousands of Nepalese migrants returning from India. Between 22 March to 28 May, 45,168 migrants returned to Myanmar from Thailand, prompting humanitarian issues due to Myanmar's weak health system and multiple concurrent conflicts.

With large numbers of migrants returning to their home countries, concerns over unsafe quarantine practices have emerged across the region. In Nepal in June, three men were charged for sexually assaulting a women in a quarantine facility, leading to protests in Kathmandu over the unsafe conditions for thousands of returned migrants workers forced into confinement. Nepal has also been criticized for the unsanitary conditions of many facilities, leading to concerns over risks of virus transmission in quarantine centers. In Myanmar, nearly 7,000 quarantine facilities were set up nationwide to cater for returning migrant workers, yet have been inadequate to house all those returned. As a result, many people have had to self-quarantine at home, posing a risk of COVID-19 community-transmission.

Along with unsafe quarantine practices, migrant workers report facing increased stigma and discrimination due to fears of COVID-19 transmissions from the general population. For example, this quarter saw the continued return and deportations of Afghans due to COVID-19 crisis, with over 97,000 returns from Iran and Pakistan in the April-May period. Returnees from Iran and Pakistan, perceived as COVID-19 hot spots, report facing significant stigma and discrimination upon return, concerning similar to other contexts in Asia.

Fears that border closures may increase instances of smuggling and trafficking

While the last quarter saw refugees and migrants returning en masse to their countries of origin, financial uncertainty, limited job opportunities and ongoing border closures are feared to trigger an increase in irregular migration back to countries with better economic prospects. In a report published in May, UNODC flagged the impacts of border restrictions and economic downturn on migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum who would be forced to turn to people smuggling and cross-border trafficking.

About 90,000 Cambodians returned from Thailand due to COVID-19, before the border shutdown in March. Upon return, unemployment, coupled with increased farm-labor opportunities in Thailand, has triggered a new wave of irregular migration back to Thailand. With borders still closed and regular avenues of recruitment suspended, there are growing concerns of instances of debt bondage, trafficking, and exploitation as Cambodians seek employment opportunities in Thailand.

Similarly, on 14 May, 20 trafficked Myanmar nationals were rescued at the Malaysia-Thailand border, attempting to find jobs in Malaysia. As security is heightened to contain the spread of COVID-19, difficulties in crossing borders are paving the way for human smuggling and trafficking.

Abuse faced by Afghans crossing irregularly to Iran, alongside concerning rising anti-migrant sentiments

On 8 May, results from an investigation by the Afghan Foreign Ministry found that 45 Afghan migrants were abused, and 17 murdered by Iranian border guards while attempting to enter Iran irregularly from Herat. This incident occurred amongst reports of rising anti-Afghan sentiments and abuse across Iran. Since April, Iran has increased the arrest and deportation of undocumented Afghans, with numbers ranging from 200 to 700 migrants per day. In early June, Iranian police killed three and injured four Afghans in a car blaze in Iran's central Yazd province, triggering public anger and protests over alleged mistreatment of Afghans in Iran.

In Afghanistan, many returned migrants and refugees have become internally displaced and face significant financial challenges, relying on scarce international aid with very limited job opportunities. With COVID-19 compounding existing poverty and unemployment and an estimated 13.4 million Afghan people already severely food insecure, it is likely that many will attempt to re-migrate in search of employment opportunities and safety.

Refugee movements restricted in Bangladesh and at the Myanmar border

In mid-April, Myanmar moved to restrict border crossings, closing the border with Bangladesh in an attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19. This has resulted in reports of thousands of Rohingya stranded at the borders, unable to seek asylum and reunite with family already in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has introduced strict lockdown measures in refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar district, with entry and exit prohibited since early April. On 8 May, Bangladesh 'quarantined' over 300 Rohingya on the island of Bhasan Char after they were rescued from stranded vessels in the Bay of Bengal. Controversial government plans to move refugees to the disaster-prone island have drawn sustained criticism with the island's habitability, lack of food security, and safety questioned. Rohingya refugees previously declined to relocate to Bhasan Char, despite continued pressure from the Bangladeshi government. There are concerns that the relocation of Rohingya from refugee camps in Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char, will be justified by COVID-19 containment measures in the coming months.

Myanmar: developments on Rohingya crisis amid continued conflict and displacement

The beginning of this quarter saw developments in Myanmar's policies pertaining to the Rohingya crisis. On 9 April, State authorities of four townships announced the withdrawal of charges against approximately 200 Rohingya people who had been arrested upon leaving the Rakhine state without required permissions. Within the same week, Myanmar's government issued two presidential directives ordering all Ministries, Regional and State governments to cease any acts defined in the Genocide Convention and prohibited the destruction or removal of any evidence of genocide. The directives were in response to the ICJ's January order and were included in the submission of Myanmar's first compliance report to the ICJ. Myanmar's response has drawn widespread criticism, with advocates citing efforts as inadequate and lacking any new measures to address the crisis in Rakhine State.

On 9 May, the Myanmar Armed Forces announced a four-month ceasefire in response to COVID-19 cases in Myanmar and UN calls for a global ceasefire. However, the ceasefire in Myanmar excludes the Rakhine and southern Chin states, where conflict is escalating. Concerns are rising for residents in eight townships in Rakhine state who have endured a year-long internet shutdown. Rights groups say the communication shutdown puts lives at risk as human rights abuses cannot be reported, nor public health information campaigns distributed.

A boat carrying Vietnamese nationals intercepted en route to Australia

Eleven Vietnamese nationals were intercepted in Timor-Leste, allegedly en route to Darwin, Australia. The migrants were seeking work on Australian farms following information provided by people smugglers of such work opportunities. Timor-Leste officials cited that the arrival of migrants posed a significant risk of COVID-19 for the nation, quarantining the arrivals prior to returning them to Vietnam, a move supported by Australia.

Australia: Adhoc reporting on self-harm has resulted in inadequate clinical support for those in detention

Research released by the University of Melbourne found that Australia's reporting on incidents of self-harm in onshore and offshore detention centers is inadequate, ad-hoc, and does not meet WHO standards. The

report highlighted a negligent lack of consistency in reporting procedures in instances of self-harm, with basic data regularly not captured, including medical severity of the incident, gender, and rate of follow up and psychological assessment. The report highlights that the lack of adequate data on self-harm has resulted in a limited capacity to form a responsive policy and ensure proper clinical support.

People seeking asylum, including those held in detention, are 200 times more likely to self-harm than the broader Australian population. This is indicative of the damaging psychological impact of protracted asylum procedures and indefinite detention.

Thematic Focus: Weaponizing COVID-19 – Rising Xenophobia in Malaysia

This quarter saw an escalation of government crackdown and hostility towards refugees and migrants in Malaysia, with numerous police raids, arrests, and deportations.

Increased hostility towards Rohingya in Malaysia

While Rohingya refugees have historically received support in Muslim-majority Malaysia, the COVID-19 crisis has triggered increasing xenophobia. Early in the quarter, a series of xenophobic petitions and viral posts surfaced, calling for Rohingya to leave Malaysia with claims that misinformation and government rhetoric were contributing to the shift in public attitude.

> *"Ever since the coronavirus outbreak began in Malaysia, some locals have been against us and see us as a threat. This makes me feel so stressed and fearful. We don't know what's going to happen next."*
> **26-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**

Police raids raise international alarm and significantly erode trust among refugees and migrants

On 2 May, amid rising xenophobia, Malaysian authorities began a crackdown on refugees and migrants, resulting in the arrest of more than 586 undocumented refugees and migrants. Following this, a second raid was conducted on 14 May, with 1,300 people arrested, including 790 from Myanmar, 421 from Indonesia, 78 from Bangladesh, and 54 from India. The offenses allegedly included lacking proper identification, overstaying visas, or holding false papers, with migrants facing detention, potential deportation, and bans from re-entering Malaysia. The representative of Indonesia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) raised concerns that the raids had caused widespread fears among migrants in Malaysia, deterring them from coming forward for testing and medical treatment.

> *"I feel very sad and scared due to the recent anti-Rohingya or anti-migrant sentiments that have been circulating, targeting vulnerable people on social media."*
> **31-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Selangor, Malaysia**

The police raids have eroded trust among refugees and migrants in Malaysia, who had previously been told that they could access testing or treatment without any fear of detainment.

Pushbacks of maritime arrivals put hundreds of refugees' lives at risk; regional solutions urgently needed

On 15 April, a large ship carrying nearly 400 Rohingya refugees washed up near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The ship reported being turned back by Malaysia, with survivors stating that 28 people had died under harsh conditions, with no food and water for 2 months at sea. Malaysia has since pushed back several boats carrying hundreds of Rohingya, claiming the move limited the spread of COVID-19. The only exception made was for one damaged boat, carrying 260 Rohingya arriving in Langkawi on 8 June.

Rights groups have received reports of several boats, each with hundreds of Rohingya refugees onboard, remaining trapped at sea due to increased border security. Reports have also emerged of traffickers holding hundreds of Rohingya hostage, demanding payments from family for their release. This has prompted concerns over a growing humanitarian crisis, and widespread fears for the health and well-being of those trapped at sea. With COVID-19-related travel restrictions in place across the region, journalists and human rights advocates, among others, have restricted access to those who may be trapped at sea, compared with the 2015 crisis. This has left many concerned that the extent of the situation may be far worse than is currently known.

The UNHCR, UNODC, and IOM have urged Australia and Indonesia, co-chairs of the Bali Process, to activate high-level discussions between its 49 members to respond to the crisis. However, Australia has rejected calls to initiate the emergency consultation mechanism, which triggers high-level discussions, claiming that the Bali Process is a policy and information sharing forum only. This is despite the emergency mechanism being triggered in 2017 to respond to the crisis on the Bangladesh/Myanmar border.

Malaysia continues to threaten deportation of refugees and migrants

In addition to the push back of boats from its territory, Malaysia has detained 296 Rohingya refugees found adrift off the coast of Langkawi, requesting Bangladesh to accept their return. Bangladesh has rejected this request, urging the international community to support the relocation of displaced Rohingya.

Both migrants and refugees continue to face the risk of deportation, with the Malaysian Defense Minister announcing that authorities are set to deport some 4,800 undocumented Indonesian migrant workers who are currently detained. The UN Network on Migration has called for the suspension of forced returns during the COVID-19 crisis, with concerns for the health and human rights protection of migrants and refugees mounting.

Rohingya allowed to land in Indonesia amid public support for their protection

On 25 June, nearly 100 Rohingya people who were stranded in a boat off the coast of Aceh, Indonesia, were pulled to shore by local residents and offered support and protection. This act of public support was in defiance of Indonesian authorities' orders who refused to assist the Rohingya on board. This happened only days after Indonesia activists, marking World Refugee Day, called on ASEAN governments to enforce the Bali process and protect Rohingya currently stranded at sea. While Indonesia has previously offered protection to Rohingya arriving by boat, it has turned boats back in recent months, justifying the move as one to prevent coronavirus contagion.
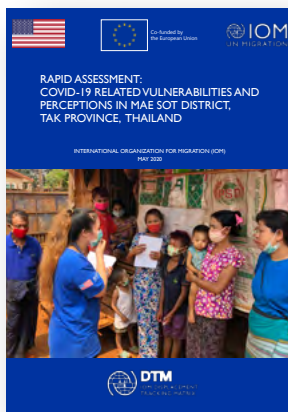
Highlighted New Research and Reports

Vietnam: Returned victims of trafficking, Issues affecting the likelihood of re-trafficking

Asylos | ARC Foundation | May 2020

The report presents Country of Origin Information (COI) on the situation faced by Vietnamese victims of trafficking returned to Vietnam, with a particular focus on those returned from the UK. The report combines a wide range of sources alongside contributions by a range of stakeholders with expertise on trafficking in Vietnam and the UK. It is intended to be used as a tool to help to identify relevant COI which can be considered by decision makers in assessing asylum applications and appeals.

Rapid assessment: COVID-19 related vulnerabilities and perceptions in Mae Sot district, Tak province, Thailand

IOM | May 2020

This Rapid Assessment explores the new set of challenges and vulnerabilities Thai and non-Thai populations face in light of the recent outbreak of COVID-19 in Thailand. It aims to highlight the extent to which these challenges and vulnerabilities are affecting local communities in key border provinces. To inform possible responses, and fill the data gap, the IOM initiated a village-level data collection exercise across the key borde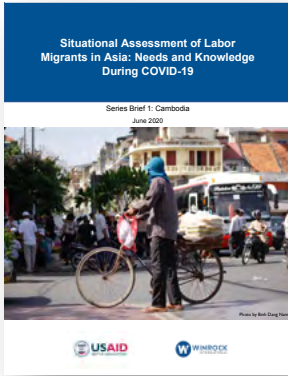r provinces. This report focuses on the results for Mae Sot district, in Tak province, Thailand, where a total of 241 people were interviewed across 1 municipality, 9 sub-districts, 85 villages and 18 communities.

COVID-19 and women migrant workers in ASEAN

Spotlight Initiative | June 2020

This brief explores the multi-dimensional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women migrant workers in and from the ASEAN region. The COVID-19 crisis is not only a health crisis but a crisis with damaging and compounding impacts on freedom from violence and harassment, employment, income, social protection, access to services, and access to justice. This brief outlines the critical programmatic and policy responses required to address these issues.

Situational Assessment of Labor Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge During COVID-19 - Cambodia

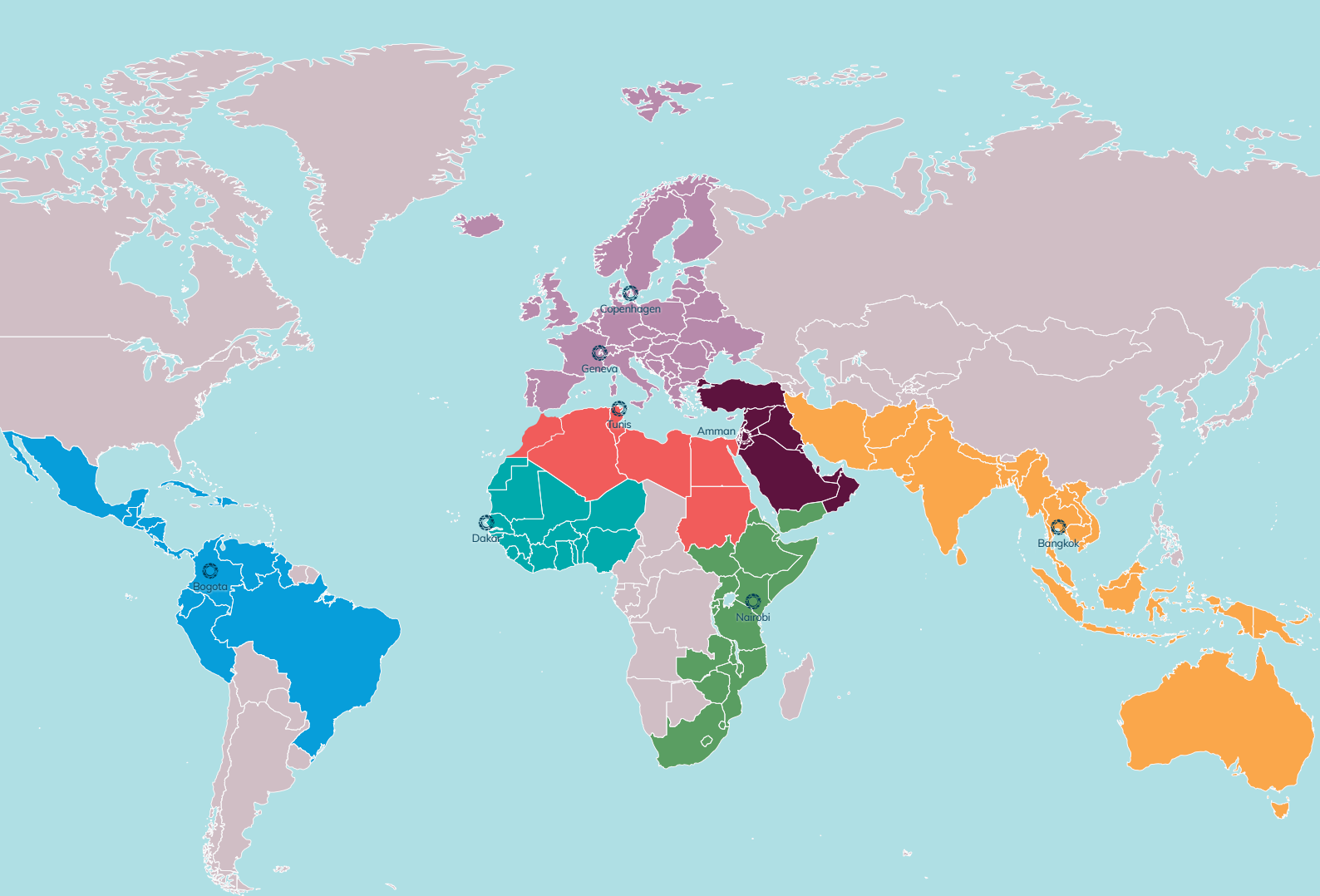**USAID/Winrock International | June 2020**

Between the months of February and May 2020, more than 90,000 labor migrants returned to Cambodia as the COVID-19 pandemic caused mass business and industry closures across the region. Tens of thousands were left unemployed, facing uncertain futures upon their return. To ascertain the short and long-term needs of this cohort, the USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project, implemented by Winrock International, conducted this assessment through quantitative surveys from returned Cambodian migrants, resulting in the development of a series of recommendations for program response.

Protecting the rights of domestic workers in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

Spotlight Initiative | June 2020

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the decent work deficits of the domestic work sector in Malaysia have come into sharp focus. The health crisis has compounded the negative effects of domestic workers' exclusion from full labor and social protections on par with other sectors. As many domestic workers are migrants in Malaysia, domestic workers also grapple with additional challenges such as lost remittances, travel restrictions and risk of arrest and detention by state officials. This note outlines the specific requirements of migrant domestic workers in light of the existing and emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and seeks to make recommendations to protect the rights of domestic workers in Malaysia. The observations and recommendations made in this note are the results of a consultative dialogue organized by the ILO-UN Women Spotlight Initiative Safe and Fair program and Ke-Arah 189, a coalition of civil society organizations advocating for the protection of the rights of domestic workers in Malaysia.

The MMC is a global network consisting of seven regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Amman, Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

For more information visit:
mixedmigration.org and follow us at @Mixed_Migration