

MMC Asia

QUARTER 3 2020



# 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 and Thailand. 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](https://mixedmigration.org) and follow us at [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/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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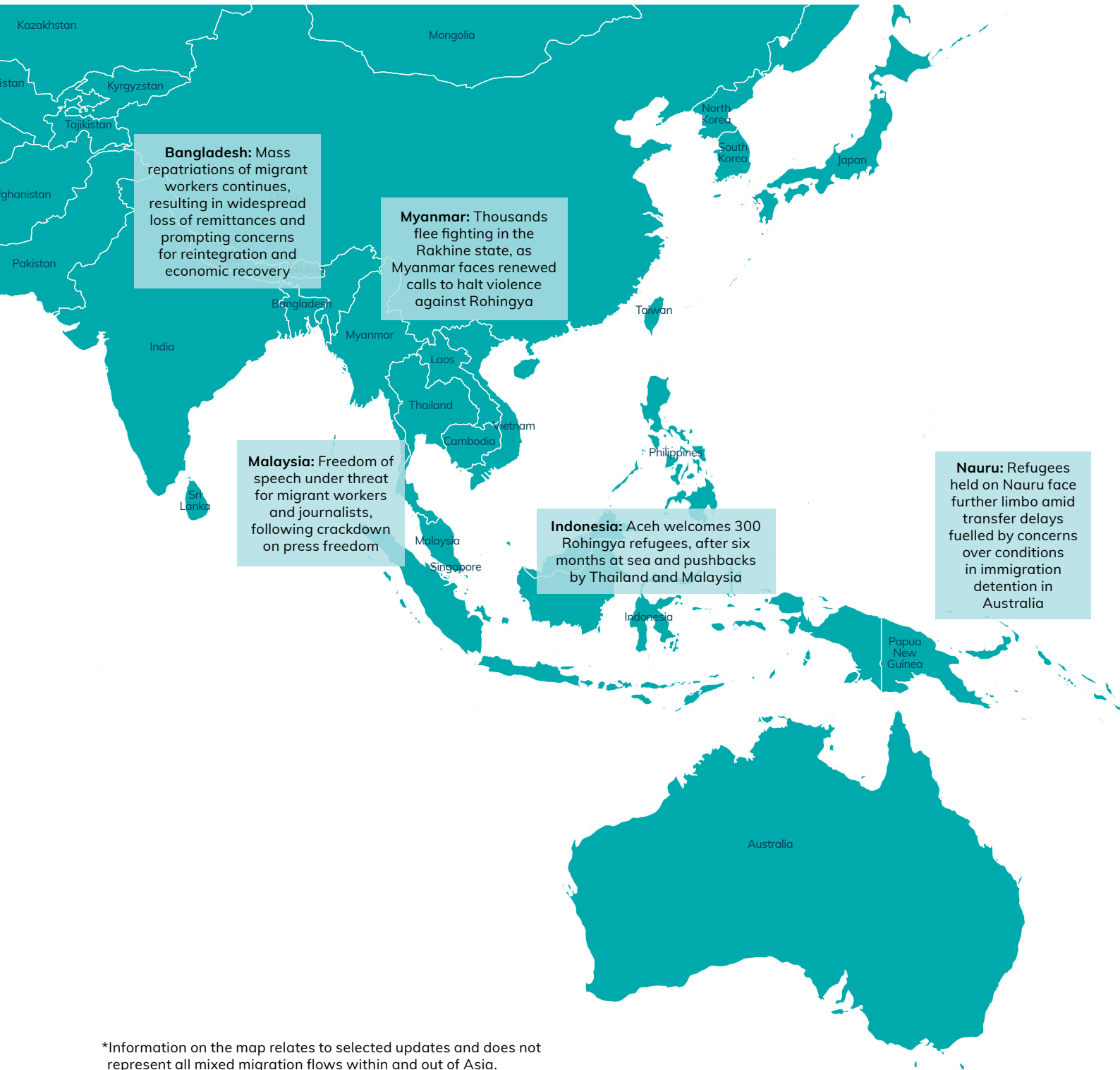
# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia

## Quarter 3 - 2020

### Key Updates

- **Indonesia offers safety for Rohingya trapped at sea:** [300 Rohingya refugees](#) land in Aceh in early September after nearly six months at sea and pushbacks by Thailand and Malaysia.
- **Worsening conditions in Australian immigration detention centres:** A study released in September found that self-harm incidents have [increased in detention centres since January 2020](#), resulting from worsening conditions and anxiety relating to COVID-19.
- **Thailand tightens border security amid irregular re-migration:** As the economy [slowly reopens](#), Thailand has [increased security](#) at its borders to limit the number of migrants from neighbouring countries entering irregularly in search of employment opportunities.
- **Mental health concerns for migrant workers grow in Singapore:** Multiple [suicides and suicide attempts](#) among migrant workers in Singapore have highlighted the poor living conditions and devastating impact of COVID-19 lockdowns.
- **Reports of wage theft rising among migrant workers during the pandemic:** CSOs and trade unions call on governments to set up [an international claims commission and compensation fund](#), as well as bolster national mechanisms to facilitate access to justice for migrant workers.

## Regional Overview





# Mixed Migration Regional Updates

National responses to stranded migrant workers has been mixed, with the majority left out of safety nets.

Across the region many migrant workers remain stuck in host countries with varied levels of support provided by local governments. While some countries have provided free access to COVID-19 related healthcare, social support measures have not been widely implemented, leaving many migrants destitute.

In Thailand, the government has [extended support to migrant workers](#) including access to COVID-19 related healthcare and visa extensions. However, the cash relief program implemented by the government excludes many migrant workers, due to the requirement of having a Thai bank account, as well as evidence of six months of contributions to a government social security fund.

In the Gulf states, [thousands of Filipino migrant workers remain stranded](#) and, despite being indispensable to economic growth and recovery, have been mainly excluded in state-led emergency responses in the region. While migrants in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain have been given access to COVID-19 related healthcare, further social support has not been extended. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates government has ordered [companies to provide stranded workers with food and accommodation](#), however few have complied, leaving migrant workers reliant on charities and community groups for emergency relief with no further support provided by the government.

## Wage theft increasing amid the pandemic

Wage theft is a common phenomenon faced by migrant workers in Gulf countries, however labour rights lawyers and unions say that [the situation has escalated during COVID-19](#) with more than 3 times the amount of wage theft cases reported between April and July, compared with the same period in 2019. In Dubai and Saudi Arabia concern over wage theft has resulted in migrant workers reportedly reluctant to accept repatriation flights for fears that outstanding [wages owed to them](#) would not be paid upon return to their home country.

While measures for seeking justice were already lacking prior to the pandemic, since COVID-19 there are calls [to overhaul legal systems](#) to ensure justice for migrant workers. In June, CSOs and trade unions called on governments to set up [an international claims commission and a compensation fund](#) to facilitate access to justice for migrant workers, however stressed that these mechanisms should complement, rather than replace, fair and functioning systems at the national level.

## COVID-19 lockdown conditions impacting mental health of migrants in Singapore

Reports of numerous cases of [suicide and suicide attempts by migrant workers in Singapore](#) has highlighted the severe impact of COVID-19 on mental health, particularly for those in already vulnerable situations. On August 7, Singapore's COVID-19 taskforce pledged to develop a sustainable response, stating that the [mental health of migrant workers has been a growing concern](#) due to crowded living conditions, strict lockdown and prolonged uncertainty. The government reported that while [there has not been an overall increase in rates of suicides and suicide attempts](#) in migrant worker populations compared to previous years, current cases could be linked to the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health.

## Reintegration concerns in Bangladesh due to lack of work opportunities and loss of remittances

The International Organisation for Migration [released a report](#) on July 20 where 70% of surveyed participants faced difficulty finding employment since returning to Bangladesh, leading to ongoing challenges reintegrating. The lack of employment opportunities has compounded financial strain felt by [local communities](#) already suffering from decreased remittances from abroad. With [hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers repatriating](#) in the last several months, concerns are mounting of the overall impact the loss of remittances, which are the second largest source of foreign earnings in Bangladesh, will have on the economy. In an effort to specifically mitigate health risks, gender based violence and social stigma among returning women migrants, the government of [Bangladesh has launched a program to provide them with emergency food](#), personal health and hygiene products as well as skill development opportunities.

## Increase in irregular re-migration to Thailand as economy reopens

On July 13, Thailand [tightened its borders](#), as migrant workers from neighbouring countries began to re-migrate in search of work opportunities and, in some instances, [to flee uncontrolled COVID-19 outbreaks](#). Thailand [arrested at least 88 migrants and 5 smugglers](#) on July 12, followed by [12 Cambodian nationals](#) on September 11, attempting to migrate for employment opportunities to the country.

In late July, Thailand announced it would open its borders to a small number of migrant workers, outlining strict quarantine conditions including [installing a tracking application on their mobile phones](#). Businesses reliant on migrant workers have been instructed they must [cover costs associated with quarantining workers](#), however concerns have arisen over increased risks of debt bondage if these costs are passed onto migrant workers and wages docked to cover costs.

## COVID-19 worsening exploitation and discrimination for women migrants

Women have experienced heightened vulnerabilities throughout the pandemic, with reports of [rising instances of physical abuse](#) and increased workloads, as well as mass job losses in industries in which women are overrepresented, including accommodation, food, sales and manufacturing.

The pandemic has [compounded existing discrimination and inequalities faced by women migrant workers in particular](#), and threatens the modest progress on gender equality made in recent decades. In particular, migrant domestic workers, the vast majority of whom are women, face [increasing workloads and less time off](#), as well as increased risk of abuse [resulting from further isolation and marginalisation amid the pandemic](#).

## Xenophobia and discrimination on the rise throughout Asia due to COVID-19

On September 17, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies released a survey conducted in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Pakistan highlighting an [increase in racism and discrimination faced by migrants due to COVID-19](#). Half of the survey respondents stated that they consider a specific group responsible for spreading COVID-19, with many mentioning Chinese nationals, migrants and foreigners as sources of the virus.

The [rise of xenophobia](#) especially impacts migrants and refugees throughout the region, with discrimination faced in countries of destination, transit and again upon return home, significantly impacting safety as well as capacity to gain employment. Rights advocates and civil society groups have urged governments to address the findings to prevent vulnerable communities from ongoing stigma and racism.

## Hostile, dangerous border conditions persist for Afghan migrants and refugees

On August 5, the Ministry of Public Health in Afghanistan estimated that at least [a third of Afghanistan's population](#) has been infected by COVID-19. Coupled with [ongoing conflict, limited employment opportunities and persistent insecurity](#) Afghans continue to flee and migrate throughout the region, despite widespread border closures. As neighbouring countries heightened border security, migration has become increasingly dangerous and difficult for Afghans.

[Twenty-nine Afghan refugees](#) attempting to reach Turkey via a lake crossing were found drowned on July 1. In late July, violent protests broke out at the Pakistan/Afghanistan border, with protesters demanding the border reopen. Afghanistan accused Pakistani forces of firing heavy artillery into civilian areas, [resulting in the death of fifteen Afghan civilians and injury of at least eighty others](#).

## Malaysia continues to crackdown on migrant workers and press freedoms

Malaysia has increased its control and censorship of critics of its harsh treatment of migrant workers. [Six Al Jazeera staff were questioned by Malaysian authorities on July 10](#) after releasing a documentary criticising conditions of migrant workers, who were under strict lockdown and faced widespread arrests. The crackdown comes amid [increasing restrictions on press freedoms](#) under Malaysia's new government, prompting concern for the right of migrant workers and advocates to freely discuss their work and living conditions in Malaysia.

A Bangladeshi migrant worker who spoke out in the Al Jazeera documentary about the situation [was arrested, deported and barred from re-entering Malaysia](#). Human Rights Watch, among others, called on Malaysia to [cease the prosecution of the migrant worker and prevent his deportation](#), highlighting the general decreasing rights of migrant workers in Malaysia.

## Deteriorating conditions for asylum seekers held in Australia's detention centres

New research shows a significant [increase in instances of self-harm in Australian immigration](#) detention centres. Between 2016 and 2019 there was an average of 71.5 self-harm incidents each year at the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA). However, in the first seven months of 2020 there had already been 99 self-harm incidents at MITA. Advocates, immigration lawyers and medical experts have linked increased rates of self-harm with the anxiety and stress of being detained and isolated during COVID-19.

The findings came amid a proposed government bill that would [confiscate mobile phones from people held in immigration detention](#). Rights activists and people in detention have called for the bill to be thrown out, claiming it would result in gross human rights breaches, compound mental health concerns and further the isolation of those held in detention facilities.

## Australia's offshore processing continues to leave refugees and asylum seekers in limbo

Almost 200 refugees held on Nauru remain stranded, after processing of approved [resettlement and medical transfers was further stalled](#) by COVID-19. In instances where medical transfers from Nauru to Australia were scheduled to go ahead, [many refugees declined to transfer out of fear of the worsening conditions in immigration detention in Australia](#). Rising concerns outlined previously in this QMMU include [overcrowded conditions](#), mobile phone confiscation and denial of appropriate medical treatment.

[As cases of COVID-19 continue to rise in Papua New Guinea, there are calls for refugees to be evacuated](#) over concerns regarding local medical capacity and existing health vulnerabilities among refugees held there. Despite initially placing refugees in offshore detention in the country, the Australian government has stated that Papua New Guinea is responsible for the health and wellbeing of the refugees.

This quarter the Australian government also announced plans to [reopen Christmas Island Detention Centre](#) to house people currently in onshore detention awaiting deportation, drawing widespread concerns. The Australian Border Force has stated that no refugees would be sent to the detention centre, however in late September it was found that [two refugees had been transferred there](#), alongside around 100 others who, according to the government, had been convicted of serious criminal offences.



# Thematic Focus:

## Three years on: Rohingya face ongoing displacement and increasing hostility across the region

### Thousands flee amid renewed violence in the Rakhine state

By July 1 the [UNHCR reported that an estimated 10,000 people had fled](#) following a week of heavy fighting between the military and local insurgents in the Rakhine state. Verification of exact numbers has been complicated by the ongoing [internet blackout](#) and journalist ban. The renewed fighting marks three years since mass violence, killings and widespread rape saw over 700,000 Rohingya flee to neighbouring Bangladesh, as outlined in [previous Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates](#).

### Refugees held in 'jail like' conditions on Bhasan Char

[Hundreds of Rohingya refugees remain held on the island of Bhasan Char](#) after being moved there following a Navy rescue in April after months stranded at sea. Bangladeshi authorities stated that the [refugees were placed on Bhasan Char](#) as part of quarantine preventative measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, however hundreds remain on the island almost five months later.

Bangladesh's plans to relocate Rohingya refugees to the flood prone island have been met with [calls for immediate relocation](#) due to a lack of basic rights, including freedom of movement and inadequate healthcare and food. In late September, refugees on the island stated they were being [held against their will in 'jail-like' conditions, subject to beatings by guards](#). Several women have also reported [sexual assaults by police officers](#), with no legal recourse made available, highlighting the urgent need to relocate the refugees off the island.

### Malaysia continues tough stance on Rohingya refugees

Once more welcoming towards Rohingya refugees, Malaysia has in recent months toughened its stance on arrivals, [turning back, arresting and deporting hundreds of Rohingya seeking asylum by boat](#). In a move that exemplifies Malaysia's increasingly hard-line approach, a group of recently arrived Rohingya were [sentenced to caning and seven months prison](#). Following international outcry, [the caning sentences were revoked](#), however jail sentences remained in place.

Malaysia's increasingly harsh response is [underpinned by growing xenophobia towards refugees and migrants in the country](#), alongside escalating nationalism. This culminated with [Malaysia announcing it would no longer accept Rohingya refugees](#) at the 36<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in June.

Despite the increased arrests of irregular migrants and boat turn backs, Rohingya refugees continue to attempt to reach Malaysia from Myanmar or Bangladesh. Up to [twenty-four Rohingya refugees went missing and are now feared dead](#), after attempting to swim ashore the Malaysian island of Langkawi on

the July 26. With Malaysia's increasingly hostile policy towards migrants and refugees, a critical gap has emerged for protection and resettlement of Rohingya refugees in the region.

## Indonesia offers safety and calls for an end to persecution and violence

In June, Acehese fisherman [rescued nearly 100 Rohingya refugees in distress at sea](#) off the coast of Indonesia. Similarly on September 7, a boat carrying [300 Rohingya refugees was again rescued and brought safely ashore in Aceh](#), Indonesia. Refugees onboard had previously been pushed back by Malaysian and Thai authorities, and [reported being held hostage](#) by smugglers for months at sea, until payment was made for their release. In the week following their arrival, [three refugees tragically died](#) with four more in a serious condition. The deaths have been linked to poor health and physical abuse inflicted by smugglers en route.

During the quarter Indonesia has also called on Myanmar to halt violence towards the Rohingya. Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, [was sent to Myanmar in September to hold discussions with the Myanmar government](#) and the UN, with Indonesia's President Joko Widodo stating the discussions would include a request to the Myanmar government to stop and prevent violence against the Rohingya. He went on to confirm Indonesia's commitment to helping to solve the protracted humanitarian crisis.

## Regional cooperation and solutions urgently needed

[Widespread calls for a regional response](#) to the crisis continue this quarter, including calls for coordination of regional protections, support, and resettlement as well as continued pressure on Myanmar to cease persecution, [provide a clear pathway to citizenship and facilitate safe return](#).

The United Nations Refugee Agency has also continued [calls for states in the region to uphold their commitments to the Bali Process](#), which currently remain unfulfilled. This includes sharing the responsibility to prevent unnecessary loss of life at sea and facilitate rescues of Rohingya refugees, so that those states who do bring those in distress ashore, do not carry a disproportionate burden.

# Highlighted New Research and Reports



## [Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profiles](#)

**IOM | July 2020**

This survey presents findings on regular and irregular migrants from Bangladesh as part of an ongoing program aimed to strengthen the evidence-based formulation and implementation of humanitarian and development policy and programming on migration in Bangladesh and the region. One of the key findings of the report is that Bangladeshi regular and irregular potential migrants share many characteristics. Regular and irregular potential migrant respondents were the same ages and had similar levels of education and employment prior to the decision to migrate.



## [Seven Years On: An Overview of Australia's Offshore Processing Policies](#)

**Refugee Council of Australia | July 2020**

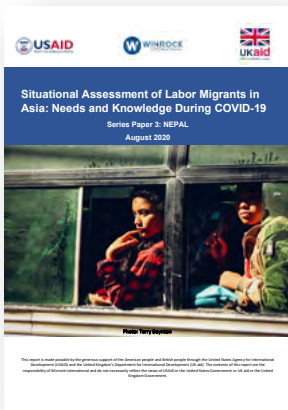
This report provides an overview of policy implications seven years after government announcements that anyone who arrived in Australia by boat to seek protection and was taken to offshore processing centres on Nauru and Manus Island, would never be resettled in Australia even if they were recognised as a refugee. It provides the key figures related to offshore processing policies over the past seven years.



## [Navigating at the Margins: Family, Mobility and Livelihoods Among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh](#)

**The Asia Foundation | August 2020**

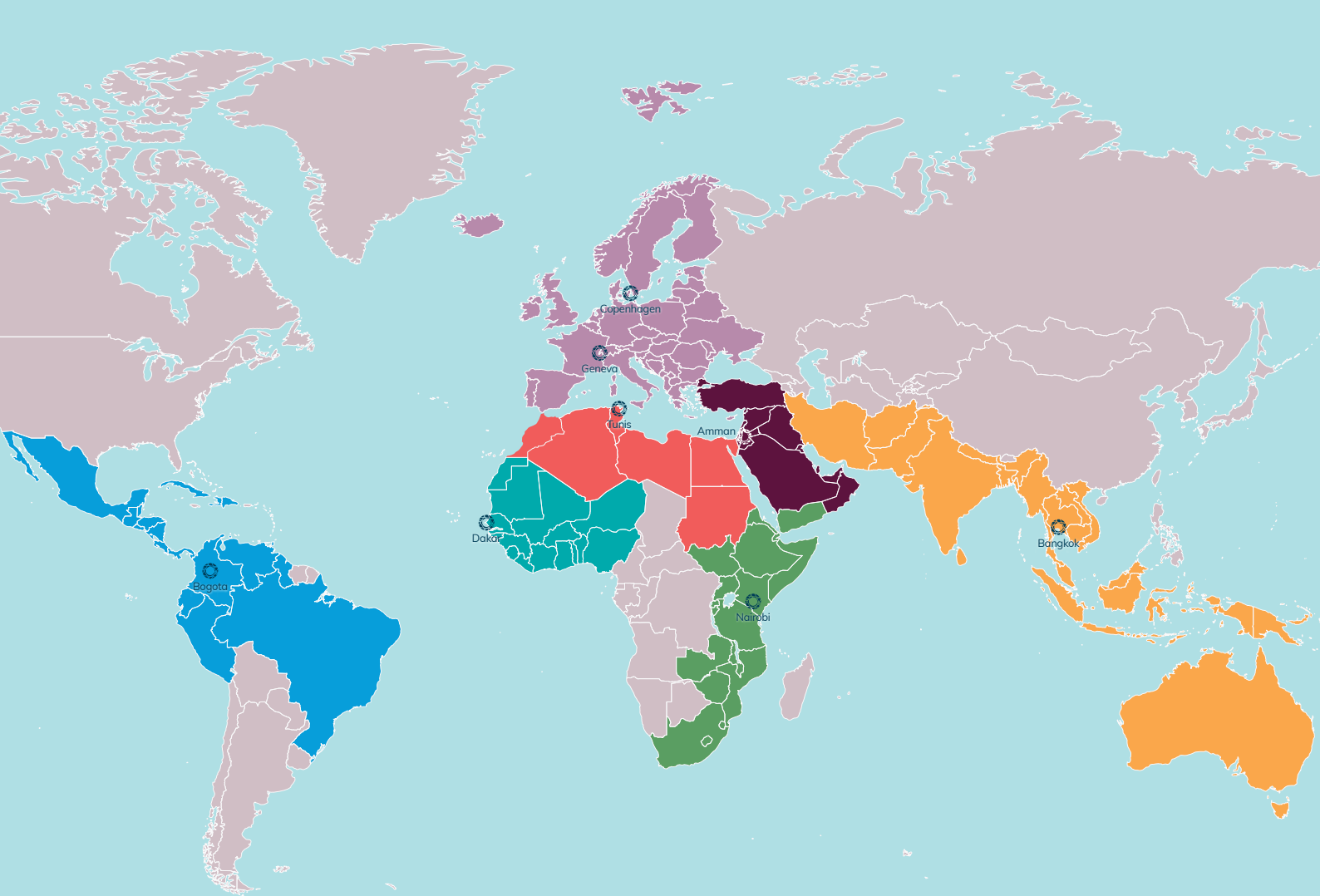
This research paper describes the many ways that individuals and families living in refugee camps in Bangladesh cope with hardship and life in displacement. It presents new information on family separation as an additional source of hardship, but also as a source of support through which remittances sometimes flow, and often as a risky but hopeful investment in a better future for those who manage to reach a third country beyond Myanmar and Bangladesh.



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

### **USAID/Winrock | August 2020**

Half a million Nepali migrants are estimated to have lost jobs abroad due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government of Nepal shut the country’s borders in late March to both its own citizens and foreigners alike, leaving migrants stuck and largely unemployed in dozens of countries. To better understand the short- and long-term needs of the returned migrant population in Nepal this quantitative study was undertaken with returned Nepali migrants.



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](https://mixedmigration.org) and follow us at [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

