

MMC Asia

QUARTER 4 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 six 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](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

Front cover photo credit:

Haroon Honari (2018)

SUPPORTED BY:



**MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK**

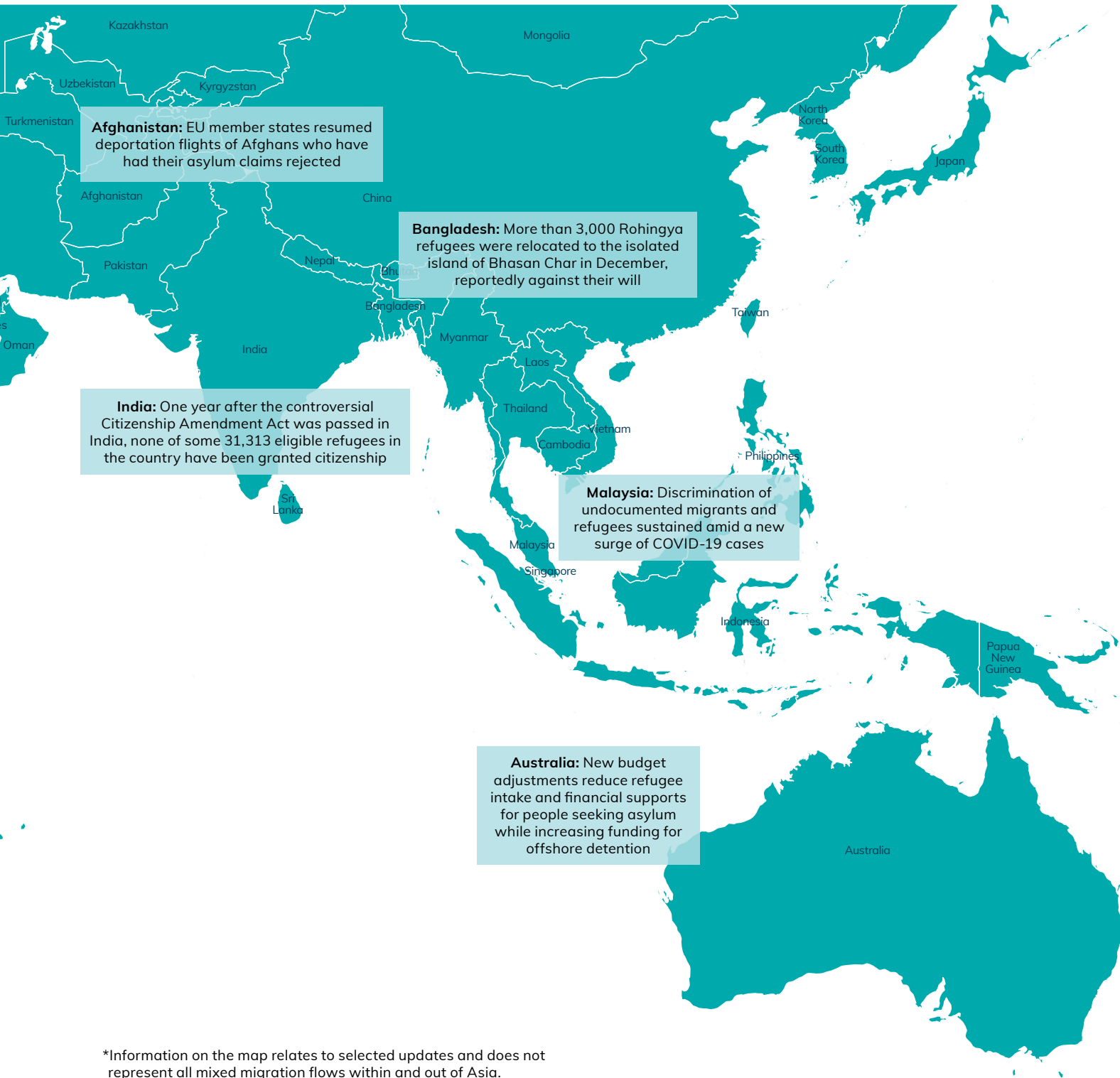
Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia

Quarter 4 - 2020

Key Updates

- **Economic difficulties prompt governments to resume labor mobility schemes:** [Bleak employment prospects](#) and the loss of [remittances](#) in home countries, have caused many migrants to consider re-migration in search of livelihoods. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pacific Islands nations, among others, have begun negotiations to resume sending their citizens abroad as part of labor mobility schemes.
- **Concerns rise as over 3,000 Rohingya refugees transferred to the isolated island of Bhasan Char:** Since early December, Bangladesh has executed its plan to move Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar refugee camps to the isolated island of Bhasan Char. Rights groups are concerned that the relocations have occurred via [coercion and force](#).
- **Initiatives to regularize migrant workers welcomed in Thailand and Malaysia, however concerns over labor exploitation persist:** [Thailand](#) and [Malaysia](#) are among countries who have rolled out recent initiatives to regularize sections of their migrant workforces. Rights groups, however, have highlighted the need to simultaneously address prevailing issues of labor exploitation in both countries.
- **Increased concerns over the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in mixed migration movements:** Reports by the UNHCR showed that women and girls worldwide, including refugee and displaced women and girls, have experienced [increased gender-based violence](#) since the COVID-19 outbreak. COVID-19 has also fueled increased human trafficking and exploitation in countries across the region, including Cambodia and India.
- **Good practices emerge across the region, although more actions are needed to promote the inclusion of refugees and migrants in national COVID-19 responses:** As COVID-19 vaccination programs are to be rolled out in many countries in 2021, concerns are emerging over whether refugees and migrants will be adequately accounted for in national vaccination plans.

Regional Overview*



Mixed Migration Regional Updates

Economic difficulties prompt governments to resume labor mobility schemes.

Across the region COVID-19 has led to widespread job losses among migrant workforces, triggering [large numbers of migrants to return](#) to their home countries throughout 2020. However, as the crisis continues, [bleak employment prospects](#) in home countries, as well as the impact of [remittance losses](#), have caused many to consider re-migration in search of livelihoods.

Within this context, some countries have begun negotiations to ensure the return of their citizens to host countries for work opportunities. In the Pacific, with the [roll-out of vaccines to some countries](#), governments expect to soon resume [labor mobility](#) to Australia and New Zealand to fill labor shortages in key migrant industries.

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it was in discussions with the Malaysian government to [allow Bangladeshi workers safe return to Malaysia](#) upon approval from their employers. These negotiations were spurred by [protests from returned Bangladeshi migrant workers](#) on 2 November in Dhaka, requesting support from their government to facilitate swift return to Malaysia.

Also this quarter, Sri Lanka [resumed sending migrant workers to Saudi Arabia](#) after a nearly ten-month recruitment suspension of foreign workers due to the pandemic. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia announced it would ease some of the [contractual restrictions placed on migrant workers](#), thereby allowing more freedom of movement, including greater ability to change jobs and leave the country without an employer's consent.

Initiatives to regularize and attract migrant workers trialed in Thailand and Malaysia, however concerns over exploitation continue

Severe labor shortages in Thailand and Malaysia have put pressure on the governments to trial initiatives to regularize and attract migrant workers. However, despite these steps, concerns over exploitation persist.

In Malaysia, on 16 November, the government launched a plan to provide [undocumented migrants stranded in the country opportunities to legally work](#) in construction, plantations, agriculture, and manufacturing industries, through to June 2021. The plan aims to revive Malaysian labor-reliant industries that have been struggling with [severe labor shortages](#) since the COVID-19 pandemic. While the initiative has been welcomed as an important first step, it has not provided any measures to protect migrant workers from human trafficking and forced labor. Recent reports have shown that several Malaysian palm oil plantations are [discouraging foreign workers from leaving](#) and asking them to work sometimes with no payment, putting migrant workers in Malaysia in potential situations of exploitation and forced labor.

In Thailand, the exodus of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers throughout 2020 has led to [labor shortages in several key industries, including fruit harvesting](#). In response to the shortages, Thai authorities planned a trial return of some 500 Cambodian workers to work in fruit warehouses in the border district of Pong Nam Ron, Thailand. Simultaneously rights groups have voiced concerns over the continued exploitation of migrant workers, [both among those in regular and irregular situations, calling for greater protections](#). Meanwhile, prospective migrants from [Cambodia](#) and [Myanmar](#) continued to attempt to irregularly cross into Thailand throughout the quarter in search of work opportunities.

Sustained discrimination of undocumented migrants and refugees in Malaysia amid COVID-19

Since late November, Malaysia has been hit with another surge of COVID-19 cases with average infection rates rising [above 1,000 daily](#). Migrant workers are among those affected the most, highlighting the [congested and unsanitary living conditions faced by many migrant workers living in dormitories](#). As a result of rising cases among migrant workers, refugees and migrants in Malaysia continued to be seen and targeted as a source of virus transmission.

A survey conducted by the Emir Research in November found that [eight out of ten Malaysian respondents](#) viewed migrants suspected of traveling without valid documents as a source of COVID-19 infection. Some Malaysian employers have even [made their foreign workers wear wristbands](#) to identify them in public, leading to further stigmatization of refugees and migrants in the country. Meanwhile, discrimination targeting Rohingya refugees in Malaysia continued this quarter, with [xenophobic hate speech](#) circulating on various social media platforms in Malaysia.

As discrimination against undocumented migrants and refugees persists, their arrest and detention continues in Malaysia. As of 26 October, there were [756 children](#) in Malaysian immigration detention across the country, 405 of them were unaccompanied.

Concerns rise as over 3,000 Rohingya refugees transferred to the isolated island of Bhasan Char

Since early December, Bangladesh has executed its plan to move Rohingya from Cox's Bazar refugee camps to the island of Bhasan Char, further isolating the refugees from the community, family, and access to humanitarian supports. On 4 December, [more than 1,600 Rohingya refugees](#) were reportedly relocated to the remote island, with a second group, comprising of [1,804 Rohingya refugees](#), transferred on December 29. According to local authorities, all those relocated had given consent for the move. However, rights groups have voiced concern that many have had very [limited information](#) provided, and been moved against their will, [coerced](#) and moved by force. Reports of forced relocations revived concerns over [previously alleged torture and abuse on the island](#), with more than [300 confined Rohingya refugees](#) reportedly having been beaten with [sticks and tree branches](#) by authorities for protesting their detention.

The relocations have occurred in the context of worsening security in the camps surrounding Cox's Bazaar and increasing hostility towards Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In October, violent clashes between gangs in Cox's Bazar [killed at least eight people and injured hundreds](#) of other refugees. Local authorities have been [urged to take any necessary action](#) to stop violence and protect refugees. However, during the same period, the government of Bangladesh announced that its [28-kilometer barded-wired fencing](#) surrounding the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District was almost complete, an initiative that has further limited the freedom of movement of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

India: Citizenship Act inactive

It has been a year since the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in India, yet [none of some 31,313 eligible refugees](#) in the country have been granted citizenship. While the government announced in early December that it would “[most probably](#)” [start the process](#) of granting citizenship to refugees from January 2021, there have been no guidelines provided to operationalize the law.

Meanwhile, some groups of refugees returned to their countries of origin due to economic hardship under COVID-19 and amid [no pathways to citizenship](#) in India. In late November, [243 Pakistani nationals](#), including Hindu and Sikh refugees, were reported to have returned to Pakistan. At the same time, the number of Bangladeshis attempting to return irregularly to Bangladesh from India has increased in 2020, marking [3,173 people](#) by 14 December, compared to around 2,600 in 2019. The CAA previously sparked [anti-Muslim riots in New Delhi](#) and is seen as a tool to actualize an [exclusivist Hindu nationalism agenda](#) in India.

Australia cuts down on asylum support

By early October, reports showed that Australia’s annual cap on humanitarian entrants has been cut by [5,000 places](#), from 18,750 to 13,750. The government argued that reducing refugee intake will allow it to concentrate on people who are already in the country seeking protection. However, throughout 2020 Australia has also been criticized for [excluding people seeking asylum and others on temporary visas](#) from Australia’s welfare programs and relief packages amid COVID-19.

In 2020, Australia also significantly cut down on financial supports given to people seeking asylum under the Status Resolution Support Services, from USD 139.8 million in 2017-18 to [USD 19.6 million](#) in 2020-21. Meanwhile, during the same period [funding for offshore detention](#) rose from USD 961.7 million in 2019-20 to USD 1.19 billion. The Refugee Council of Australia called the Budget adjustments “[shattering](#)”, and Amnesty International has called for a review of Australia’s [Community Support Programs](#) for refugees in the country.

Simultaneously in Australia this quarter, reports have shown that the length of time people spend in detention has increased significantly, from [less than three months before 2013-2014 to an average of 584 days in 2019-20](#). This has sparked grave concerns for the human rights of people in immigration detention in Australia. The Australian Human Rights Commission, the Commonwealth ombudsman, doctors, and civil society actors have also [criticized the practice of handcuffing refugees and asylum seekers](#) for medical appointments, pointing out its inhumane and illegal nature. In Australia, handcuffing has also been reportedly [overused](#) on asylum seekers attending minor civil court matters.

EU countries resume deportations of Afghan asylum seekers

In October, EU member states discussed the extension of the [Joint Way Forward agreement](#), a deal [facilitating the deportation of](#) Afghans from Europe. Soon after this, on 16 December, deportations of Afghans from Europe resumed after a nine-month hiatus due to the pandemic, with the first flight landing in Kabul, carrying [11 deportees from Austria and Bulgaria](#). One day later, [40 Afghan asylum seekers](#) were

deported to Kabul from Germany. Other European countries, including Sweden and Hungary, are reportedly taking steps to resume the deportation of Afghans who have had their asylum claims rejected, amid [human rights concerns](#) over deporting individuals to Afghanistan from Europe.

Afghan returnees continue facing mounting struggles

Since early 2020, [nearly 800,000 Afghans have returned or been deported to Afghanistan](#) from Iran and Pakistan. Upon return, the prospects of those returning or deported are limited. With continued insecurity due to [conflicts and civil unrest](#), as well as an economic depression, returnees are likely to become [internally displaced and face significant financial hardship](#). It is predicted that around [13.15 million people in Afghanistan](#), or 42% of the population, are likely to experience high levels of acute food insecurity between November 2020 and March 2021.

Against this backdrop, on 23-24 November, representatives from more than 70 governments and international organizations met for the quadrennial Afghanistan Conference to discuss key challenges. Participating states committed more than USD 3.3 billion for Afghanistan. However, concerns are now over whether the pledges can be translated into [actual responses and durable solutions](#) for millions of Afghans trapped by war and poverty.

Increased concerns over the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in mixed migration movements in Asia

This quarter concerns continued over the [short- and long-term impact](#) of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, especially women and girls. Reports by the UNHCR show [increased instances of gender-based violence](#) since the COVID-19 outbreak, especially among refugee and displaced women and girls. Female Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, for instance, reported having more difficulties in [accessing specialized support](#) in instances of abuse and domestic violence since the pandemic. Also this year, large numbers of Rohingya women and children have embarked on dangerous sea journeys from Cox's Bazar, making up [63%](#) of Rohingya rescued at sea. Reports of [sexual and gender-based violence](#) occurring at the hands of smugglers, and human traffickers en route have also raised international concern.

COVID-19 has also [increased the risk of human trafficking and exploitation](#) among women and children. In Cambodia, anti-trafficking organizations reported that the impact of COVID-19 on the country's garment, hospitality, and tourism sectors has fueled a spike in human trafficking for forced marriage this year, with [an average of one new case reported every three days](#) in 2020 - double the caseload of previous years. Meanwhile, in India, the number of trafficked children reportedly increased in 2020, with [1,675 children](#) rescued from situations of exploitation during the April-November period.

Within this context, in November, the UN released [USD 25 million](#) from its emergency fund to support women-led organizations that prevent and respond to gender-based violence in humanitarian settings during COVID-19. The grant is expected to bring transformative changes to women and girls, prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and advance access to sexual and reproductive health.

Good practices emerge, although more actions are needed to promote the inclusion of refugees and migrants in COVID-19 responses

In this quarter, good practices have continued in the Asia Pacific region towards the protection and inclusion of refugees and migrants, especially in terms of accessing healthcare and testing amid the pandemic. In Nepal, since November, the government has instructed relevant bodies to provide [free PCR tests and treatment for refugees](#) in the country. Meanwhile, on 20 December in Thailand, after the outbreak of 689 cases, mainly made up of [Myanmar migrants](#), the government announced that it would provide free testing for more than 10,000 people, inclusive of migrant workers.

However, as COVID-19 vaccination programs begin to be rolled out in many countries, concerns mount over whether refugees and migrants will be excluded from national vaccination plans. Within this context, the [IOM](#) and [UNHCR](#) have called for the explicit inclusion of refugees and migrants in national vaccine plans. This includes facilitating the continued access of any person of concern, regardless of their status, to essential health services, including the COVID-19 vaccines when available.

Thematic Focus: More attention needed for climate change-induced displacement and migration

The effects of climate change have [intensified rapidly in recent years](#). Globally, in 2019, climate change-induced hazards triggered [some 24.9 million displacements](#). In the first half of 2020 alone, disasters displaced [9.8 million people](#) worldwide. Together with [violence and persecution](#), climate change is one of the main factors that force people from their homes.

The Asia-Pacific region has been identified as the [world's most climate-vulnerable region](#), inclusive of both slow-onset and sudden-onset events. Coupled with the ongoing crisis of COVID-19, climate change will continue to be a risk multiplier for vulnerable groups, including refugees and migrants, in the region.

Continued displacement across Asia due to natural disasters

The last quarter of 2020 saw continuous and intensified natural disasters across Asia. By early October, [weeks-long destructive storms](#) claimed hundreds of lives in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, since December, powerful storms have [borne down](#) on Pacific nations. Though flooding and storms are common in Asia during monsoon seasons, climate change is making such disasters more intense and unpredictable with more [severe effects](#).

Climate change-induced disasters in the region have displaced millions and triggered the movements of people both within countries and across borders. In the Philippines, for instance, in mid-November, some 320,000 people were forcibly displaced. In Fiji, cyclone Yasa, one of the [strongest storms](#) ever recorded in the Southeast hemisphere, led to at least 23,000 people taking shelter in more than 300 evacuation centers overnight. Cyclone Amphan which slammed into Bangladesh and India earlier in May 2020 also resulted in [three million evacuees](#) and nearly two million damaged homes. It is predicted that by 2030, [40 million people in South Asia](#) will have migrated or been displaced due to disasters brought on by climate change, unless countries in the region take [strong measures](#) to mitigate the impacts of global warming.

Urbanization - From internal displacements to cross-border migration

A 2020 study by the IOM found that urban areas are a [key destination](#) for people on the move in the context of slow-onset events, and thus warn that they will become hotspots of risk related to the impacts of environmental change. Despite offering relative safety, cities can also be [inhospitable](#) for newcomers with shortages of jobs and housing driving many migrants and refugees into urban slum areas where they are in turn more [vulnerable to environmental threats](#). A 2018 research by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that rapid urbanization in low- and middle-income countries has been associated with the growth of highly vulnerable urban communities living in settlements which are at [high risk from extreme weather patterns](#).

The impacts of slow-onset events along with pressure on cities due to urbanization is likely to only increase [regional migration within Asia](#). Indeed, climate change is likely to be increasingly experienced as one of the multiple mixed motivators prompting migration within the region. For instance, steadily rising temperatures in Afghanistan over the past years have [decimated the livelihoods of tens of thousands of households and led to severe drought](#) in the northwest of the country. Drought and destitution, coupled with ongoing conflict and violence has led to almost [2.5 million Afghans](#) leaving the country and seeking asylum abroad, the largest protracted refugee population in Asia and the second-largest refugee population in the world.

When crisis meets crisis: Climate change and COVID-19

On 2 December, a virtual meeting hosted by UNHCR concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a [test case](#) for the world's emergency preparedness to climate change, emphasizing that everyone must work together to solve the world problems. However, while both the pandemic and climate change are global crises, climate change is not yet being considered with the [same sense of urgency as COVID-19](#).

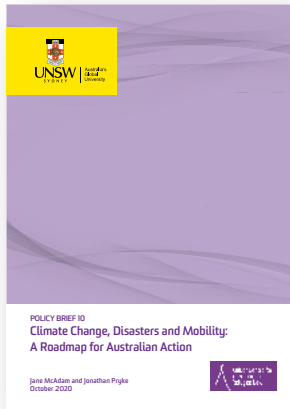
Climate change, coupled with the pandemic, has already had [diverse impacts](#) on refugees and migrants across Asia. Overall, reports have shown that the increasing and intensified disasters in Asia-Pacific have [stretched aid funding](#) amid the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the most vulnerable groups in the region often reliant on aid for their livelihoods. Furthermore, people displaced as a consequence of disasters have had to face double challenges due to physical distancing and movement restrictions. Meanwhile, COVID-19 has interrupted the supply chains of many industries, forcing a large number of migrants to return home and putting additional pressure on the [ecosystem](#) of migrant-sending countries, especially in [environmentally fragile and remittance-dependent states](#).

Actions needed to address climate change-induced displacement and migration

Civil society actors have continuously called for States in the region to act on climate change-induced migration. On 10 December, the University of New South Wales' Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law [urged the Government of Australia](#) to do more to help neighboring Pacific island nations facing an existential threat from climate change. Recommended measures include the establishment of a new ["Pacific access" visa category](#) for those forced to leave as a result of climate change and natural disasters.

While the relationship between environmental change and migration remains complex and multilayered, migration should not be seen as a failure to adapt but a part of [successful adaptation](#). An article published by the Migration Policy Institute in December suggested that safe and orderly migration could contribute to migrants' own [climate resilience](#). This requires the enhancement of migrants' legal status, social protections, conditions of work, as well as health, and housing.

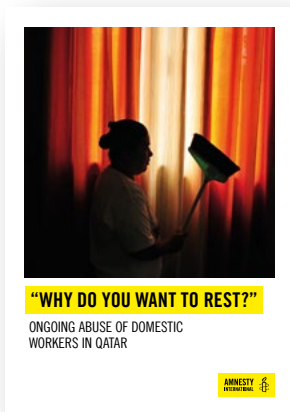
Highlighted New Research and Reports



[Climate Change, Disasters and Mobility: A Roadmap for Australian Action](#)

Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law | October 2020

The report focuses on the role of mobility as a release valve for Pacific Islanders at risk of displacement in the context of disasters and climate change. It demonstrates why Australia should proactively develop laws and policies that enable people in the Pacific region to move out of harm's way, thereby harnessing migration as a climate change adaptation strategy in its own right.



[“Why do You Want to Rest?” Ongoing Abuse of Domestic Workers in Qatar](#)

Amnesty International | October 2020

The report looks at how the serious flaws in Qatar's laws, policies and systems of implementation are failing the most vulnerable people in the country – the army of women domestic workers toiling from dawn till late at night in private homes, isolated and hidden from the public gaze. It draws on interviews and information gathered from 105 women either currently or recently employed as domestic workers in Qatar, as well as interviews with embassies of labor-sending countries, activists and community leaders assisting domestic

workers. The report also reflects information provided by the state of Qatar in response to written requests for information.

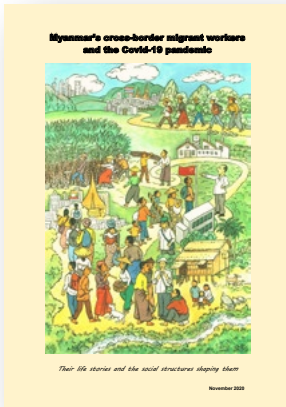


[The Road to Worthy Work and Valuable Labour](#)

Embode | November 2020

The study presents an assessment of migrant labour in Malaysia, with a focus on the palm oil sector. The report provides insights into the situation of migrant workers, including the pre-departure process in their home countries and the working conditions experienced in destination, using Nepal as a case study. The report provides important recommendations on how companies, governments, employers and recruitment agents can improve the protection of migrant workers and better ensure that their fundamental rights are respected and upheld. The primary intention of the exercise was to inform industry decisions

and actions moving forward.



[Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers and the Covid-19 pandemic: Their life stories and the social structures shaping them](#)

TNI | November 2020

Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers have been significantly affected by the impacts of the pandemic. This report examines the socio-economic impacts with a focus on the well-being of these workers. The report looks into who the cross-border migrant workers are, why they have become migrant workers, and how they perceive their own conditions. Their individual life stories are highlighted helping to reveal underlying factors that condition their access to

food, shelter, clothing, health and education, and in this way, determines what work they do where.



[The EU and the politics of migration management in Afghanistan](#)

Chatham House | November 2020

The paper considers the asymmetries in European and Afghan policies on migration. It highlights the myopic European emphasis on returning arrivals to their country of origin, and the fact that this approach neglects the implications of potential post-peace deal scenarios (involving some kind of political settlement with the Taliban) for the management of returnees. The paper underlines the need to provide a more balanced interpretation of the Afghan government's (insufficiently acknowledged) achievements on the issue. The authors offer tailored

and practical policy recommendations for the Afghan government, the EU, civil society in Afghanistan, and international donor organizations working with Afghanistan on migration issues and displaced populations.

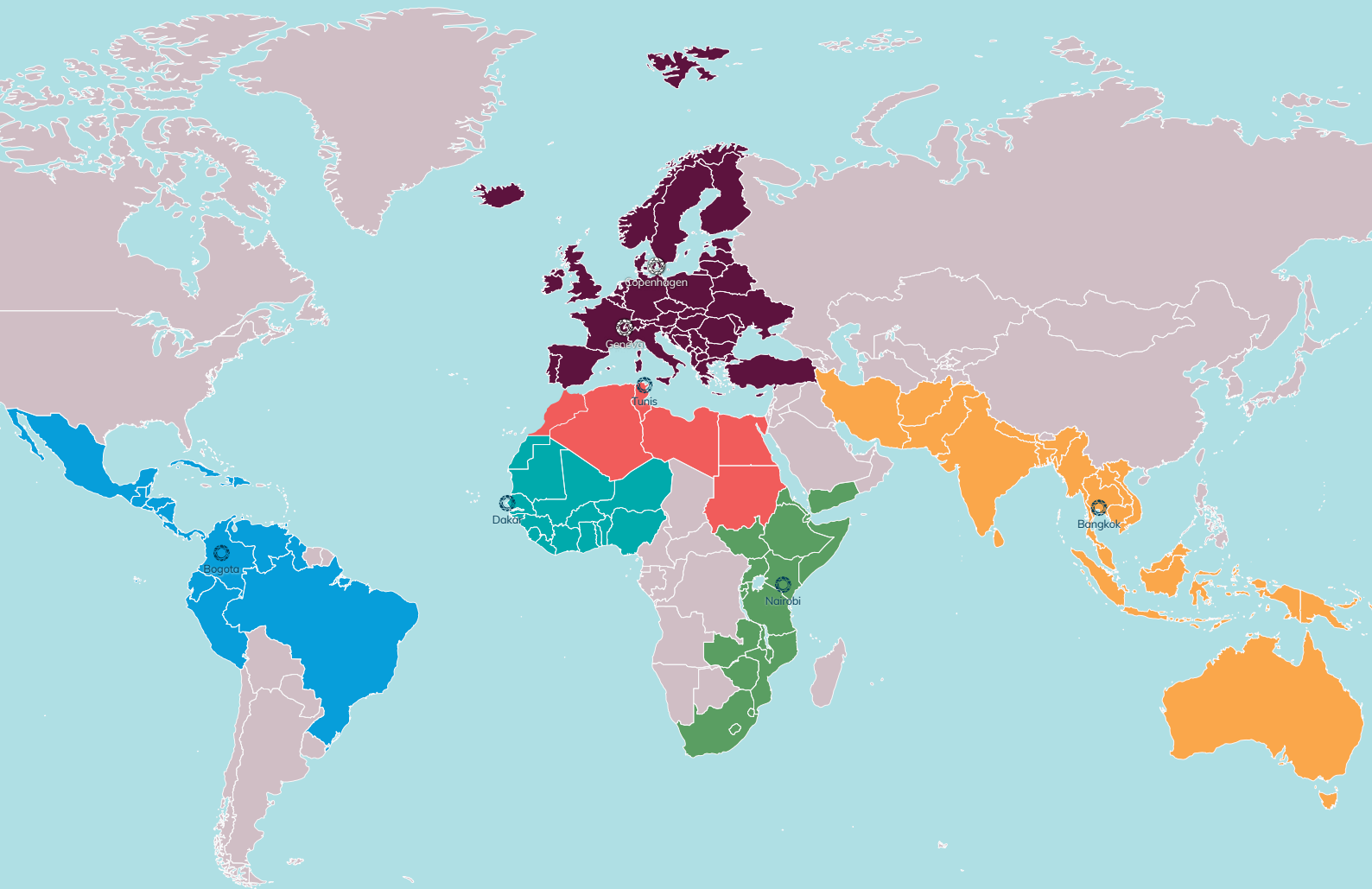


[The Torture in My Mind: The Right to Mental Health for Rohingya Survivors of Genocide in Myanmar and Bangladesh](#)

Fortify Rights | December 2020

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh continue to experience severe mental health impacts of genocide and mass atrocity crimes perpetrated in Myanmar, adversely impacting their daily lives and functioning long after physical wounds have healed. This report is based on a participatory action research study conducted by a team of Rohingya researchers trained by Fortify Rights. It provides quantitative data revealing high levels of trauma, depression, and

distress, including staggering rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, experienced by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.



The MMC is a global network consisting of six 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 Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

For more information visit:

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

