

MMC Asia

QUARTER 1 2021



# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia

This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers Southern and Southeast Asia. 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](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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Haroon Honari (2018)

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**MINISTRY OF  
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OF DENMARK**

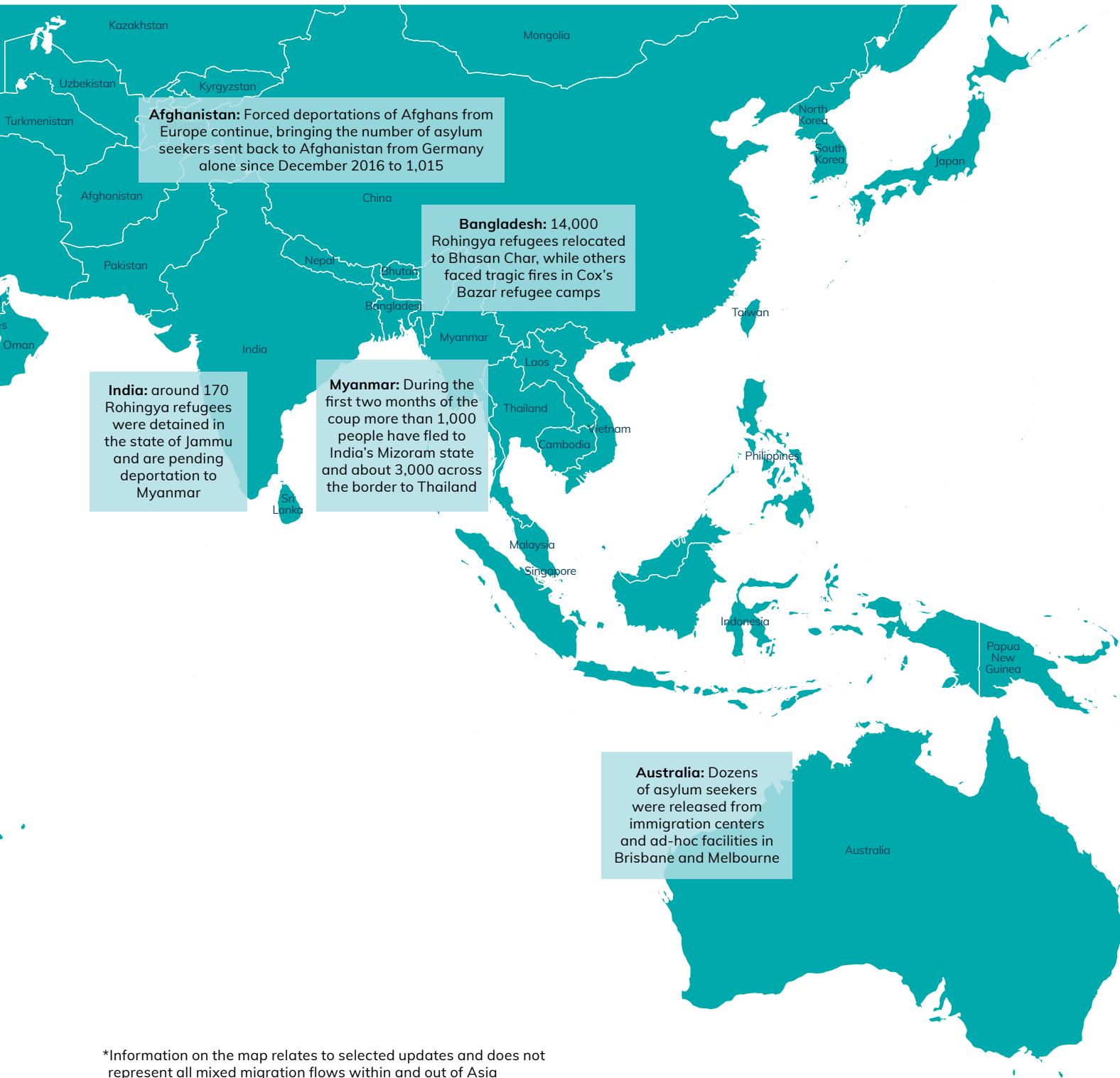
# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Asia

## Quarter 1 - 2021

### Key Updates

- **COVID-19 induced economic downturn leads migrants to explore upskilling in order to re-enter job markets:** As COVID-19 continues to exacerbate situations of [vulnerability for migrants and refugees](#), many have explored opportunities to upskill in order to re-enter the labor market.
- **Myanmar's multiple crises trigger migration and displacement:** [Escalating violence](#) at the hands of the country's military continues to pressure Myanmar nationals to seek safety in neighboring countries, including India and Thailand.
- **Continued health concerns for refugees and migrants in immigration detention facilities:** This quarter saw a spike in COVID-19 cases in detention centers across Asia and the Pacific, including [Japan](#), [Thailand](#), and [Australia's offshore centers in Papua New Guinea](#).
- **Lengthy resettlement waits trigger growing desperation among refugees and people seeking asylum in Indonesia:** This quarter saw reports of a compounding [mental health crisis among refugees stuck in limbo in Indonesia](#), including growing desperation, self-harm, and suicide rates.
- **Uncertainty around the inclusion of refugees and migrants in COVID-19 vaccination plans across the region:** [Refugees in Nepal](#) became the first refugees in the Asia-Pacific to have received COVID-19 vaccinations. Nations including [Singapore](#), [Thailand](#), [South Korea](#), [Malaysia](#), and the [Maldives](#) have all announced that they will offer the vaccines to foreign workers. However, the actual implementation of those vaccination plans remains uncertain while ["invisible" migrants](#), including those with no legal documents, as well as refugees are likely to be the [last in line](#).
- **Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration:** From 10 to 12 March, the [first regional review of the Global Compact](#) for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in Asia and the Pacific was held. The review called for greater collaboration among countries to implement the global framework to among other things, reduce situations of vulnerability experienced by [migrants across the region](#).

## Regional Overview\*





# Mixed Migration Regional Updates

## COVID-19 induced economic downturn leads migrants to explore upskilling in order to re-enter job markets

This quarter saw COVID-19 continue to exacerbate situations of [vulnerability for migrants and refugees](#). While many migrant workers who remain in host countries struggle with access to livelihoods, discrimination, and [poor treatment](#), [returned migrants](#) faced mounting struggles in their countries of origin in terms of reintegration and employment.

Despite widespread job loss as a result of strict lockdowns, many migrants have taken the opportunity to upskill. Millions of Indian [migrant workers who lost their jobs as a result of widespread sector closures](#) have turned to online training courses to learn new skills as they seek to reenter the labor market. In the Pacific, the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of international travel have had serious impacts on employment and livelihoods across the region, especially in countries that are reliant on international tourism. As a result, there has been a push for labor mobility schemes as well as [upskilling of migrant workers](#) to expand overseas labor opportunities, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, for migrants from the Pacific Islands.

## Myanmar's multiple crises trigger migration and displacement

On 1 February 2021, [Myanmar's military](#) overthrew its newly elected government, halting the country's democratic transition and sparking nationwide protests. Aid groups have since voiced concerns over accessing some [330,000 internally displaced people](#) within Myanmar who rely on humanitarian assistance for their survival. Other worries include that [escalating violence](#) at the hands of the country's military, including arrests, torture, and killing of demonstrators, will increase the number of internally displaced people as well as see more people [fleeing to neighboring countries](#).

The worsening security situation, coupled with [rising food and fuel prices](#), [cash shortages](#), as well as a breakdown in [healthcare](#), continues to pressure Myanmar nationals to seek safety and migrate to neighboring countries. Within two months of the coup, [more than 1,000 people](#) have crossed the border from Myanmar to India's Mizoram state, including [Myanmar policemen](#) and their families who refused to obey orders to break up pro-democracy protests. At the same time, about [3,000 people](#) have fled across Myanmar's eastern border to Thailand. With the number likely to rise further, concerns are mounting over the safety of civilians in Myanmar, as well as the spillover effects the coup may have on other countries in the region.

India and Thailand have both shown resistance to receiving those seeking safety. In India, local authorities initially advocated for building [designated refugee camps near the border](#), while rights groups have urged the government to swiftly [process asylum applications](#) as people arrive. However, India has sent [at least 100 people](#) back to Myanmar, exposing them to the risks of arrests and execution by Myanmar's military. In Thailand, rights groups accused the government of [sending the majority of those seeking safety](#) back across the border, despite the Thai Prime Minister saying they had returned of their own accord. Thailand has also

announced that it has [prepared](#) shelters for the recent refugee arrivals, highlighting its responsibility to uphold human rights standards.

## Continued deportations of Afghans from Europe despite alarming security threats

Forced deportations of Afghans from Europe continued this quarter amid rising concerns over the security and wellbeing of deportees back home. On 10 March, a chartered plane landed in Kabul carrying 26 Afghan men deported from Germany. The flight was the 37th deportation flight from Germany to Afghanistan since December 2016, bringing the number of asylum seekers sent back to Afghanistan from Germany to [1,015](#).

Deportations of Afghan nationals from the EU have resumed since late 2020 as EU member states are convinced that big cities in Afghanistan are [safe](#). However, while [struggles to reintegrate](#) are reported by Afghan deportees, violence continues in multiple parts of the country. The first two months of 2021 saw a worrying spate of brutal attacks deliberately targeting civilians, resulting in more than [80 deaths](#). Despite peace talks, heavy fighting between the insurgents and government forces continued leading to widespread displacement across the country. In January alone, about [17,000 Afghan families](#) in Kandahar fled their homes following months of heavy fighting.

## Continued health concerns for refugees and migrants in immigration detention facilities

This quarter saw a spike in COVID-19 cases in detention centers across Asia and the Pacific. In February, Japan confirmed a new variant of COVID-19 and an infection cluster emerged at a Tokyo immigration facility. The facility currently holds [133 detainees](#), including asylum seekers and migrants in violation of Japan's immigration laws, 39 of whom were tested positive for COVID-19. Japan's immigration detention system has been [widely criticized](#) for its lack of medical standards, close monitoring of detainees, and inadequate response to emergencies.

Meanwhile, in Thailand, [most of the 77 migrants](#) from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia held in two overcrowded cells at immigration detention offices in Bangkok have become infected with COVID-19, highlighting the concerning conditions for migrants and asylum seekers in Thai immigration facilities.

At the same time, concerns are rising over the [130 refugees and people seeking asylum](#) held in Australian offshore processing in Papua New Guinea (PNG). PNG has recently seen an alarming increase in COVID-19 cases and around [13 refugees and people seeking asylum there have tested COVID positive](#) already. Rising COVID-19 cases in PNG are worrying given the country's poor medical infrastructure and healthcare workers shortages.

## 14,000 Rohingya refugees relocated to Bhasan Char, while others faced tragic fire in Cox's Bazar

In this quarter, Bangladesh continued relocating Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char island amid criticism that those relocated were so [against their will](#). By the end of March, [14,000 Rohingya](#)

[refugees have been relocated](#) to the island. From 17 to 20 March, a UN delegation made their [first visit](#) to the remote island with findings from the trip yet to be shared. Despite concerns over the [inhabitability](#) of the island, Bangladesh announced it aims to eventually [transfer 100,000 Rohingya refugees](#) there.

Meanwhile, nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees left in Cox's Bazar continued facing devastating situations. Within the first three months of 2021, two massive fires swept through the camps, on 14 January destroying [550 shelters](#), and again on 23 March killing [15 people](#), displacing 45,000 others, and destroying 10,000 homes. Rights groups continue to voice concerns over the safety of the camps, as well as criticized the 28 kilometers of barbed-wired fencing erected by the government which prevented many Rohingya refugees from [escaping the deadly fires](#).

Amid the situation, onwards movements from Cox's Bazar continued. On 26 February, India's coast guard intercepted [81 Rohingya refugees adrift](#) in the Andaman Sea, eight people on board were confirmed to have died. Right after the event, Bangladesh announced that it was under [no obligation](#) to take those stranded refugees. India has been providing food and medical aid to the group but has by far [refused to allow](#) them to disembark onto their territory. The incident highlights not only a continued humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees but also the lack of responsibility-sharing mechanisms between states to respond to the crisis.

## Lengthy resettlement waits trigger growing desperation among refugees and people seeking asylum in Indonesia

This quarter saw reports of a compounding mental health crisis among refugees in Indonesia, including growing desperation, self-harm, and suicide rates, with [13 suicides since 2014 and four in 2020](#). Indonesia hosts nearly [14,000 refugees and asylum seekers](#), many of whom originally intended to reach Australia and are now trapped in protracted transit for years, awaiting resettlement as a result of Australia's hardline border management policies.

While irregular maritime movements to Australia have all but ceased, movements of Rohingya refugees from Indonesia to Malaysia continue. On 6 January, more than [30 Rohingya people](#) were caught arriving in Malaysia by boat from Indonesia and imminently charged with entering the country without valid documents. Soon after that, on 30 January, [hundreds of Rohingya refugees](#) were reported missing from a refugee camp in Lhokseumawe on Indonesia's northern coast. This group was said to have been smuggled to Malaysia to reunite with family and join the large Rohingya population there. In response, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency announced that it will [monitor all boats](#) passing through the country's waters from Indonesia to curb irregular movements. This mirrors Malaysia's hardline approach to border management and increasing pushback of boats carrying refugees amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

## India ranked among the lowest for key indices of migrant inclusivity

In January, the Migration Policy Group released its [Migrant Integration Policy Index](#) ranking India the lowest among 52 assessed countries for migrant inclusivity. Key indices show that the country's performance is particularly bad in [policy areas](#) such as anti-discrimination, health, labor market mobility, and access to citizenship.

Meanwhile, amid the controversial Citizenship Act, mass protests have flared across parts of India since December 2020. India's northeast state of Assam is on the front lines of a [citizenship clash](#) that has already pushed some 2 million people to the brink of statelessness. At least [31 people](#) have since then been killed in police crackdowns, including five in Assam.

Further in this quarter, India continuously ramped up and deported Rohingya Muslim refugees, a move that supports its [Hindu nationalist agenda](#). On 7 March, around 170 Rohingya refugees were detained in the state of Jammu and are pending [deportation](#) to Myanmar. Reports showed that many of them hold [UNHCR cards](#) and are owed international protection. Fearing detention, [hundreds of Rohingya refugees](#) left the refugee camps while others came to New Delhi and [protested outside UNHCR offices](#) demanding the immediate release of their relatives and community members.

## Uncertainty around the inclusion of refugees and migrants in COVID-19 vaccination plans

While many countries roll out their COVID-19 vaccination plans, debates continue about “vaccine nationalism” and concerns persist about refugees and migrants being the [last in line](#). [“Invisible” migrants](#), including those with no legal documents and those confined to their workplace, as well as refugees are particularly vulnerable.

Some countries in the region have shown leadership in including refugees and migrant workers in the vaccination program. The extension of vaccinations to migrant populations mostly comes from a realization that [migrant worker segregation](#) does not work, as examples from Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia have shown in 2020.

On 19 March, [refugees in Nepal](#) received COVID-19 jabs during the rollout of the country's national vaccination campaign, becoming the first refugees in Asia-Pacific to have received vaccinations. Nations including [Singapore](#), [Thailand](#), [South Korea](#), [Malaysia](#), and the [Maldives](#) have all announced that they will offer COVID-19 vaccines to foreign workers, including undocumented migrants. In February, Iran announced that migrants in the country, the majority of whom are from [Afghanistan](#), will get the COVID-19 vaccines. During the same period, Australia said it would offer free access to COVID-19 vaccines to people inside [immigration detention facilities](#).

Despite these promising steps, the actual implementation of vaccination plans remains uncertain. In Bangladesh, for instance, while the government has confirmed that [Rohingya refugees will be included](#) in the national vaccination plan, no concrete plan was finalized to ensure [equitable vaccine access](#) for their very large number of refugees. Further, according to the UN [only 54](#) out of 188 states have included explicit provisions to cover refugees, asylum seekers, stateless and internally displaced people in their vaccination rollout.



## Australia: Rights groups demand more actions from the government as dozens of asylum seekers released after years of detention

Since January 2021, Australia has released dozens of asylum seekers detained in immigration centers and ad-hoc facilities in Brisbane and Melbourne. By late January, a total of [65 people](#) were released in Melbourne. Soon after that, in early March, about [50 people](#) were released from a Brisbane immigration detention site. Pressure remains on the government to support and release the [200 people who remain in detention facilities](#) in PNG and Nauru, as well as another 140 medical evacuees in detention around Australia.

Despite their newfound freedom, people who were released face multiple mental health impacts due to prolonged detention with documented cases of [trauma and anxiety](#). Additionally, while they have been granted [bridging visas](#) for six months, they have been provided with little to no government support. After spending seven years in detention, it has been a challenge for many to [recover and find a job](#) in a highly competitive labor market in Australia, putting them at risk of falling into destitution.

At the same time, given the multiple crises in the region, Australia has been urged to do more to support displaced communities across Asia. While the number of successful permanent residency applications [increased significantly among people from Hongkong](#) due to concerns for their safety over China's new security law, rights groups have urged the Australian government to provide asylum to [temporary visa holders from Myanmar](#) as violence continues in the Southeast Asian nation. In response, the Department of Home Affairs announced that it will grant a visa extension for those who are eligible, while protection visa decisions will be based on [individual case assessments](#).

## Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

From 10 to 12 March, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Regional UN Network on Migration for Asia and the Pacific brought together over 200 government representatives and stakeholders to the [first regional review of the Global Compact](#) for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in Asia and the Pacific.

Recognizing international migration as an [important multidimensional reality](#) in the region, the review called for greater collaboration among countries to implement the global framework to [benefit migrants of all statuses](#). Among the conclusion was the need to implement policies to maximize the potential of migration, as well as to minimize the negative impacts of migration on migrants, with particular respect to labor and human rights.

# Thematic Focus:

## A perfect storm: Malaysia's forced deportation of refugees and migrants from Myanmar amid the military coup

Amid mounting concerns over the increasing use of violence against civilians in Myanmar, on 24 February, Malaysia deported [1,086 Myanmar nationals](#) into the depths of the coup. Malaysia's actions are the latest blow to the multiple crises facing the people of Myanmar, adding a new burden to the fragile state grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, unresolved ethnic armed conflicts, and an increasingly violent coup.

The recent deportation highlights the continuation of Malaysia's concerning approach towards refugees and undocumented migrants. With UNHCR [denied access](#) to Malaysian detention centers since August 2019, those deported include [at least 9 people](#) registered with UNHCR, as well as migrants in vulnerable situations, including unaccompanied and separated minors. The deportation also raises alarms about the increasing insecurity faced by refugees and migrants from Myanmar in other countries in the region, including Bangladesh and Malaysia.

### Malaysia – a safe haven no more

Malaysia has a long history of hosting refugees and migrants starting as early as the [British colonial period](#). As of the end of January 2021, there are some [178,710 refugees and asylum seekers](#) registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, the majority of whom are from Myanmar, comprised of more than 100,000 Rohingya together with other persecuted ethnic minorities. The country also hosts [around 2 million](#) documented foreign workers, along with an estimated 2-4 million without documentation.

During the pandemic, refugees and migrants in Malaysia have faced exacerbated [situations of vulnerability](#) and more than ever need assistance from their host government. However, COVID-19 has hardened the Malaysian stance on refugees and migrants. Since May 2020, nationwide immigration crackdowns targeting undocumented people have led to more than [8,000](#) being arrested and held in Malaysian detention centers. Throughout this time many have been forcibly deported. In July 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, over [19,000 undocumented migrants](#) were sent back to their home countries, the majority of whom were Indonesians, followed by Bangladeshi and Myanmar nationals. These actions further undermine their significant contribution to the country's economy, particularly in Malaysia's labor-intensive sectors.

### Protracted and new crises in Myanmar

For decades, conflicts have simmered in multiple parts of Myanmar, but the mounting humanitarian and human rights concerns are now higher than ever. Since June 2020, after a 17-year ceasefire, conflict resumed in Kachin state which previously displaced more than [100,000 people](#). In Rakhine State, the protracted conflict against the Muslim minority Rohingya has posed threats to the safety of [around 600,000 Rohingya](#),

including 120,000 people who are effectively confined to camps. Meanwhile, the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh have faced worsening conditions and increasing instability with recent [relocations](#) to the isolated island of Bhasan Char.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further proved that Myanmar does not have the capacity to protect people within its border, even before the military coup. In 2020, the spontaneous return of more than [160,000 migrants](#) from Thailand amid the pandemic put a strain on the economy. Widespread unemployment and destitution, together with the closing of land borders, have further worsened the situation of poor and displaced people in Myanmar.

## Human rights-centred regional response framework is the way forward

The lack of a comprehensive regional framework on irregular migration and refugee issues has led to ad hoc responses as well as the reluctance of many states in the region to uphold the rights of migrants. As a result, [hundreds of lives](#) of refugees and migrants were lost at sea in 2020, while [arrests and forced deportations](#) have affected thousands of others.

With no durable solutions in sight for the protracted conflicts, growing economic difficulties, and political instability, Myanmar nationals will likely continue seeking refuge abroad or embark on risky irregular journeys to other countries, mainly Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, both for safety and better livelihood opportunities. Forced deportations, like those carried out by Malaysia, will further take away their rights and increase their vulnerabilities.

# Highlighted New Research and Reports



## [COVID-19 and Migration for Work in South Asia: Private Sector Responsibilities](#)

**UNICEF | March 2021**

The impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia have heightened and further exposed the vulnerability of migrant workers. These workers and their families are frequently overlooked in the pandemic response – and children are too often ignored in the discourse on migrant workers. Businesses and governments are responsible for protecting all workers from human rights abuses. When this is not done, previous achievements and future development are put in peril. The discussion and recommendations in this report are based on a wide range of authoritative sources, accessed and investigated from May 2020–January 2021.



## [Urban Refugee Management in Indonesia and Southeast Asia](#)

**Resilience Development Initiative | February 2021**

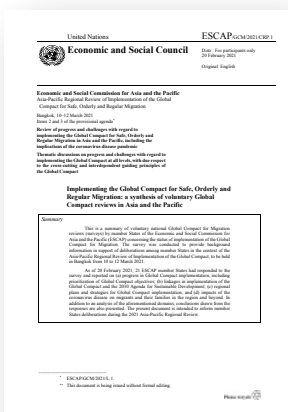
This document, titled Annotated Bibliography: Urban Refugee Management in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, aims to guide readers into the world of works of literature on urban refugees and related themes in Indonesia specifically, and within the broader Southeast Asian context. Urban refugees is a growing issue in migration studies that is still receiving little scholarly attention. Definition of the term urban refugee is still subject to debate, as each concerned entity has its distinct definition of the term depending on the practical use and objective of their work. This annotated bibliography seeks to promote an understanding of urban refugees by presenting brief summaries of studies related to refugee management in urban areas. With that, hopefully, readers will be able to form a working definition of the term urban refugee, and identify the challenges of refugee management at national and city levels.



## The Tradition of Toil - The interplay of social norms and stigma in relation to human trafficking in Indonesia Case Study: West Sumba and South-west Sumba

### **IOM | February 2021**

This report provides an overview of how social norms and stigma can be drivers of vulnerability to trafficking and barriers to effective reintegration of survivors in West Sumba and South-west Sumba, Indonesia. It explores the ways in which social pressures and expectations that are put on people to migrate, in turn, heighten the risk of trafficking and exploitation of individuals, particularly women. Of note, the data gathering phase only identified cases relating to female returnees. This involved seven direct interviews with female returnees as well as interviews with family members of other female migrants, as well as community members. Therefore, the research builds understanding on how the roles played by family members, communities and service providers, due to historical norms and influences, shape agency and access of returnee migrant women to service providers in Indonesia.

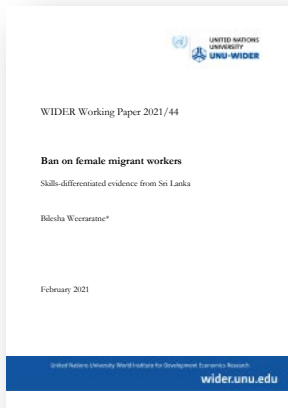


## Implementing the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: a synthesis of voluntary Global Compact reviews in Asia and the Pacific

### **ESCAP | February 2021**

This is a summary of voluntary national Global Compact for Migration reviews (surveys) by member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) concerning the status of implementation of the Global Compact for Migration. The survey was conducted to provide background information in support of deliberations among member States in the context of the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of Implementation of the Global Compact, to be held in Bangkok from 10 to 12 March 2021.



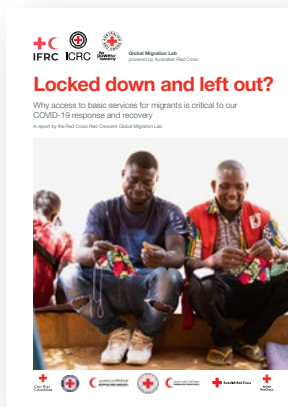


## [Ban on female migrant workers: Skills-differentiated evidence from Sri Lanka](#)

### **UNU-WIDER | February 2021**

This study examines the skills-differentiated impact of a restrictive female labour migration policy in Sri Lanka using monthly departure data from 2012 to 2018 in a difference-in-difference model. The Family Background Report policy has resulted in decreasing departures among lower-skilled groups—female domestic, unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled workers—and increasing departures among middle-level and professional workers. The decrease in departures of lower-skilled groups is consistent with the

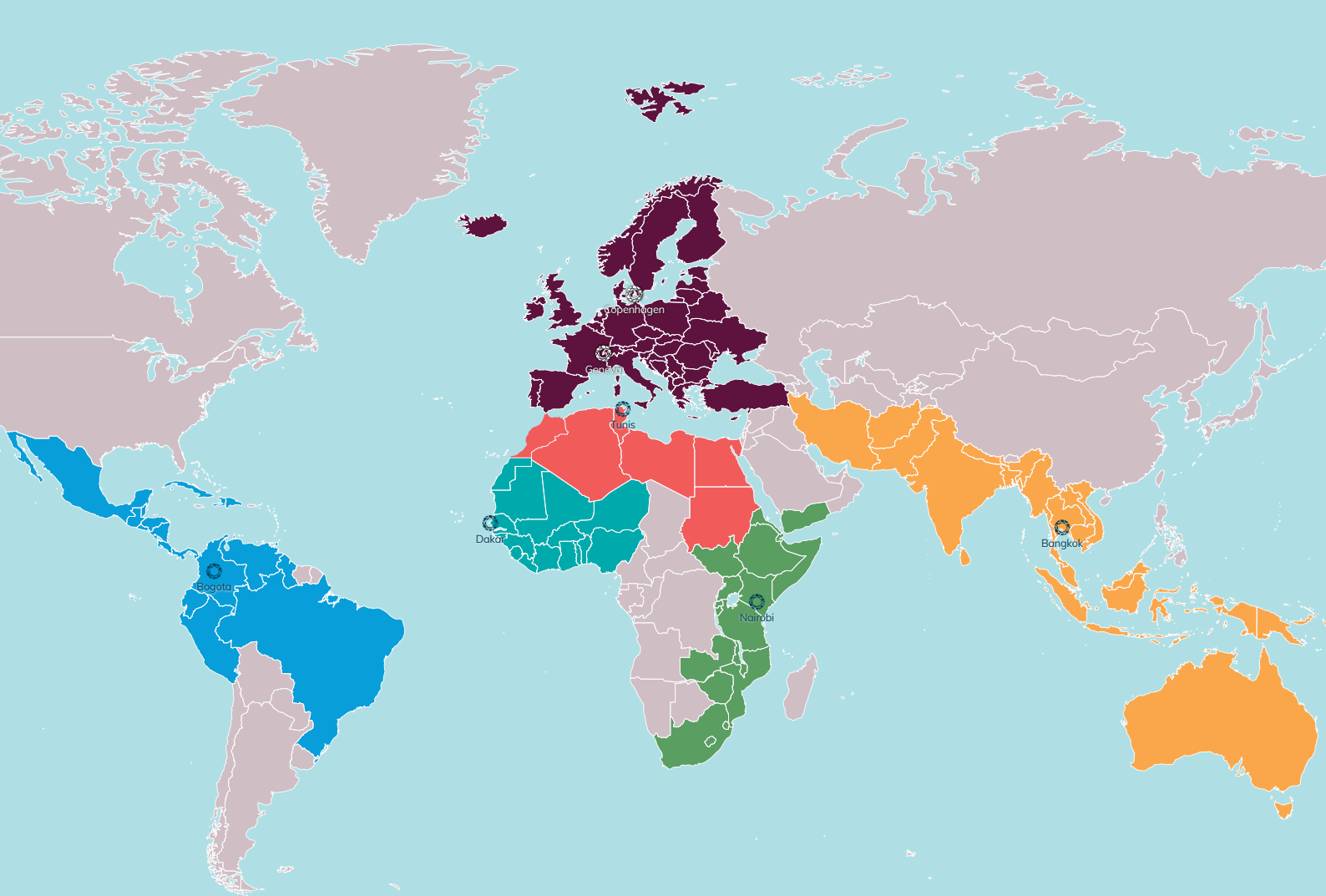
objectives of the policy and existing impact evaluation studies, while the increase in higher-skilled workers is consistent with the literature on Family Background Report-related corruption and mis-reporting of skills to avoid the policy. Thus, the policy is associated with higher involvement of lower-skilled workers in recruitment-related corruption, higher exposure to recruitment-related vulnerability, and lower foreign employment opportunities.



## [Locked down and left out? Why access to basic services for migrants is critical to our COVID-19 response and recovery](#)

### **IFRC/ICRC | March 2021**

This report was prepared by the newly established Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Global Migration Lab and draws on research conducted by eight National RCRC Societies (National Societies) from Australia, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sudan, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It provides evidence of the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related policy measures on migrants' access to basic services, including vaccines.



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

