This snapshot updates #40. These COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots are designed to capture the latest research, information and analysis in a fast-moving environment. Topics will be repeated from time to time as analysis develops. If you have an item to include, please email us at research@iom.int.

New research & analysis on returning migrants

Stranded irregular migrant workers during COVID-19 crisis: The question of repatriation by Ahmet Içduygu

Repatriating Filipino migrant workers in the time of the pandemic by Maruja M.B. Asis

Return and Reintegration without Assimilation: South Asian Migrant Workers in the Gulf during COVID-19 by Bilesha Weeraratne

COVID-19 and Reverse Migration in Nepal by Upasana Khadka

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Reality of Quarantine, Isolation and Social Distancing for the Returnee Migrants in Bangladesh by Kazi Abduk Mannan & Khandaker Mursheda Farhana

Migrants' dilemma: To stay or to go

Many migrants have been faced with the dilemma of staying in their destination country or returning to their country of origin. For some migrants, the decision of returning back home has appeared as a viable survival strategy, if not the only one, after losing their jobs and not being able to access support measures, including social protection. The predicament awaiting many migrants back home reveals the precarious situation the pandemic has created:

⇒ Thousands of Venezuelans have reportedly returned home despite the border closures and the socioeconomic situation in their origin country.

⇒ More than 400,000 Afghans have left Iran to return to Afghanistan due to coronavirus transmission fears.

⇒ Over 70,000 Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand have returned amidst the outbreak.

⇒ Many thousands of migrant workers have returned from the Gulf, while others remain stranded.

Migrants' return: Overcoming diplomatic challenges

The pandemic has highlighted returning citizens in need of consular assistance can overcome tense diplomatic relations. For instance, despite a lack of formal diplomatic ties, Turkey and Armenia, with diplomatic support from Georgia, managed to facilitate an evacuation corridor for hundreds of Armenian migrants returning from Turkey via Georgia.

By June, more than 60,000 Armenians had returned to Armenia from Russia and other parts of Europe, with an estimated 5,000 remaining in Russia.

Repatriation and return assistance

As noted in COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #40, many countries have been repatriating their nationals stranded abroad since the start of the pandemic. For instance, as of August 2020:

⇒ Close to 600,000 EU citizens have been repatriated to their countries of origin;

⇒ The Philippines (Department of Foreign Affairs) has repatriated 144,795 overseas Filipino since February 2020;

⇒ Egypt has repatriated over 77,000 nationals.

Migrants have been repatriated as well as part of these repatriation operations, especially those living in precarious conditions after losing their jobs. Voluntary return assistance for irregular migrants have also resumed in some countries with the progressive ease of travel restrictions. In August, some 134 Iraqi migrants who were in Greece wished to go back home were returned to their country of origin, while 118 Ghanaian migrants stranded in Libya benefited from IOM's first Voluntary Humanitarian Return Programme movement since it was put on hold five months earlier.

The return paradox

The decision to return back home has proved to be challenging for many:

⇒ Loss of income/remittances and return to worsening economies at home with protracted unemployment looming or a slim prospect of re-migrating.

⇒ Increased social and financial vulnerabilities.

⇒ Spread of anti-immigration sentiment and stigmatization of returning migrants.

⇒ Aggravated situations of protracted displacement in which migrants become trapped in a cycle of internal displacement within their own country.

> **"** *While [IOM] recognize[s] and support[s] measures in place to contain the spreading of the virus, it is important to stress the right to return and find ways to ensure stranded migrants have the option to return to their countries of origin, all the while taking into consideration necessary protective and health measures and in coordination with the receiving country.*
>
> *COVID-19 and stranded migrants*, IOM Issue Brief

Returnees in Action

In an initiative promoted by IOM, many returnees have been encouraged to contribute and assist their governments in their fight against the pandemic. In Gambia, 20 returnees have worked together to produce protective equipment for frontline border officials.