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WHY SOUTH ASIAN MIGRANTS NEED ACCURATE INFORMATION

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Lack of access to services and information, including changed border processes, repatriations, poor health care, among other factors, place South Asian migrants at risk. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of Afghan, Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants, and rendered accurate information even more necessary. ICMPD's Migrant Resource Centres reach out and provide reliable information to empower migrants in an effort to address this challenge.

Since the start of the COVID-19 global health crisis in March 2020, which saw Iran become one of the hardest hit countries in the region, Afghans have been returning home due to the fear of contracting the disease, and to avoid being isolated in a country with an overstretched public health system. An estimated 250,000 Afghans returned from Iran between 20 February and 31 March 2020, with thousands also returning from Pakistan, Turkey and some countries in the European Union. In Bangladesh, an estimated 400,000 migrants have already returned, while the government is facing pressure to expedite the return of many more despite lockdowns and travel restrictions around the world.

A global crisis at the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic can see migrants and those with an irregular status often ignored. Migrants are often forced into overcrowded living conditions, camps, detention centres and, in the case of Afghanistan, having to endure overcrowded bus journeys to get to safety, which in itself raises the risk of infection. Migrants are also often among the first to lose livelihood and income, as well as access to essential services. Thousands of migrants still wish to return home as they have lost their jobs, but face a scarcity in return flights and, upon return, are often stigmatised by their local communities as carriers of the COVID-19 virus.

Misinformation, stigmatisation and increased vulnerability to exploitation

Access to information and quality of information are at the heart of many challenges faced by refugees and migrants, and the need for more accurate and timely information becomes more crucial at times of crisis. As a recent Amnesty International report highlighted, misinformation

around the disease in many camps - where the internet is unavailable and older residents have limited access to smart phones - has increased. This leads to a much higher risk of the spread of disease. Stories of migrants being stigmatised and attributed to the spread of the disease have been reported, with many refused access to proper healthcare in their host countries.

Why information centres for migrants are needed

In many countries in South Asia, the resources and institutions that specifically focus on migrants are limited. Providing easy access to reliable information for migrants is difficult, and often not a priority for governments. Fraudulent agents and criminal networks often fill the gap, providing misinformation on migration options and jobs abroad, playing on vulnerabilities and misfortunes of migrants and their families. Exacerbated by the pandemic, the need for transparent information and outreach through government institutions has become even clearer. Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) aim to fill this gap by providing an essential lifeline of information for migrants. Established under one respective lead ministry in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan, the ICMPD-managed MRCs function as the communication arm on migration issues for the respective governments, with the aim of reducing the vulnerabilities of potential, outgoing and returning migrants.

Mahabubul Alam, MRC Bangladesh Coordinator, said they have been very active on Facebook and mobile platforms since the outbreak of the pandemic, with over 10,000 followers and over 2 million reach, responding to inquiries from both potential migrants wishing to leave the country and from labour migrants wanting to return home. In Pakistan, the situation is very similar with over 50,000 followers and over 7.5 million reach. Facebook followers have increased by the thousands since the lockdown, as one of the main channels through which migrants reach out to the MRCs: “We get calls and Facebook messages asking about what happens when their visas expire and when there are no flights due to the lockdown and travel restrictions. They want to know when flights are resuming and, in some cases, where they have given their passport to the embassy in their host country, how they might be able to travel once flights have resumed.”

Most of these workers are based in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Singapore and Malaysia, where national governments focus on providing support services to their own citizens with the needs of migrants continually neglected, as reported by the BBC. With labour force recruitment currently stalled, irregular migration is likely to increase. Europol, the EU’s policing agency, has already noted an increase in smuggling and trafficking cases with the likelihood of false information from traffickers to increase and become more dangerous when

public health is a consideration, as seen in the detection of 148 migrants in the back of a truck in North Macedonia, the majority being Pakistani migrants.

The combination of existing security issues and poor economic prospects for the long-term and high unemployment, in particular for the youth, has seen the MRC Kabul deal with a large number of inquiries from potential migrants on irregular migration but also from returnees considering going back irregularly to their former host country (i.e. Iran, Turkey). “The main destination for Afghan migrants is Turkey, increasingly as a destination and less as a transit country, and so many go via Iran. We see an increased interest again now, with traveling restrictions easing up. We received over 150 counselling requests only last week, mostly on irregular migration and seeking asylum”, says Sayed Honaryar, MRC Coordinator in Kabul. The MRCs address these requests through in-depth counselling with the aim to deter people from leaving the country through irregular channels.

It has become clear over the past months that the need and willingness to migrate will not cease, even with a global pandemic. The pandemic has also shown us the importance of clear and transparent communication and the need for governments to step in and assume responsibility in providing this information to their citizens. Integrated in ministries, MRCs strive to do this and enhance existing capacities in the Silk Routes countries to support migrants in their decision-making, beyond the current Covid-19 crises.

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