

15 April 2020

COVID-19 FROM BAGHDAD TO DHAKA

by ICMPD staff worldwide

ICMPD field operatives track the ramifications of Covid-19 for migration in more than 90 countries. Over the past weeks, they have reported on developments in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. Here are some of the most important.

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan are in full lockdown or have firm curfews, restricting the movement of nearly 2 billion people. Effective social distancing is not a realistic prospect currently, particularly in India or Bangladesh where population density is extremely high. In addition to harsh economic realities, there is a lack of ventilators, hospital places and testing capacity throughout the region. Furthermore, several countries host huge refugee populations, notably Bangladesh, Iran and Pakistan, or have significant numbers of internally displaced people such as Iraq.

Almost 16 million people in Afghanistan could contract Covid-19, resulting in some 100,000 deaths, according to estimates from the [Afghan Ministry of Public Health](#). Last month, the news that Iran had the highest infection rate in the region suddenly accelerated an ongoing trend of Afghans leaving the country to return home. Whilst some [140,000 undocumented Afghans](#) have returned so far this year from Iran, and also Pakistan, 53,069 of these moved in a single week in March, as the seriousness of the pandemic became clear.

Pakistan hosts nearly [1.5 million Afghan refugees](#). Land borders with both Iran and Afghanistan are closed. At the request of the Afghan authorities, Pakistan opened the Torkham and Chaman crossing points [from 4-9 April](#), but only to allow a further 20,000 Afghans to return home. (Initial plans to quarantine these returnees proved unrealistic.) [As of 10 April](#), Pakistan is also allowing controlled truck traffic one way, three times a week, for the provision of food and medicines to Afghanistan.

With by far the largest population in the region, India is at risk of having as many as [400 million infections](#). This is why India's leaders responded decisively to the virus by ordering an early lockdown. Unfortunately, that also meant millions of low-skilled workers from the countryside lost their jobs in the cities. With most public transport offline and with no money to buy food, many had no option but to go home — most on foot. The result is the [biggest human migration on foot since the 1947 Partition](#), which displaced 14 million people. Over the past month, an

enormous cohort has walked for hundreds of miles amid chaos, starvation, and in some instances, death.

South Asian countries simply cannot sustain lockdowns for very long. As Imran Khan, Pakistan's prime minister said recently: "[if we shut down the cities...we will save people from corona, but they will die from hunger.](#)" Millions are daily workers reliant on daily wages. As such, they can only go very short periods without hitting crisis point. Then the only recourse is often support from relatives abroad. India has the world's largest diaspora with many individual families reliant on money sent from family working away from home. Millions in Bangladesh and Pakistan are in a similar situation. However, global remittances are under pressure because migrant workers are losing work due to the lockdowns. Given [global remittances tend to far outstrip the total annual amount spent on overseas development aid](#), the pandemic spells potential catastrophe for any who are reliant on this form of financial help.

Another worry are the several million labour migrants from South Asia in the Gulf countries. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone there are around 3.3 million Indian- and 1 million Pakistani- workers. Initially authorities there indicated that South Asian workers will retain their jobs and residency rights. However, conditions are difficult with [camps of migrant workers partly enclosed in lockdown](#) to prevent the spread of disease. If the current situation drags on for months, the situation could become more desperate. Over half a million Bangladeshi migrant workers already returned home between January and mid-March as Covid-19 spread to around the world. And Bangladesh is now [under severe pressure](#) to bring back hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrant workers and detainees. Imran Ahmad, the minister in charge of expatriate welfare, recently stated: "[We want to repatriate \[bring home\] Bangladeshi migrants as needed. But we will have to bring them after the lockdown is over.](#)"

Iran currently accounts for most confirmed cases in the region (71,686 according to the WHO on 13 April 2020 and 4,474 deaths). Luckily, the country has a reasonably robust public health infrastructure. Medical supplies are exempt from the sanctions linked to Iran's nuclear activities. On the other hand, Iran also has one of the largest refugee populations in the world with nearly a million Afghans still registered in the country, not including an even larger number of refugees who are undocumented or not in contact with the authorities. In addition, the low oil price, resulting from the global lockdown, is a seriously worrying issue for the cash-strapped government. Against the background of these worries, [Iran will now start opening](#)

[low-risk economic businesses again on 18 April, a move that has led to warnings](#) of a potential second wave of Covid-19.

Finally: Iraq. The Iraqi government recently signalled that its curfew may extend to the end of April but is due to be phased out over the coming weeks. Government services are gradually coming back online. The outbreak has stretched national capacities to the limit, particularly in terms of providing basic food and medical support to the impoverished, including [nearly half a million internally displaced persons](#). As with Iran, oil revenues – which make up 90 per cent of Iraq’s national income – are down some \$2.5 billion on the last month alone. To date, Iraq has a [surprisingly low](#) reported infection rate: [1,378 confirmed cases and 78 fatalities](#). The World Health Organisation expects reported cases to rise sharply over the next few weeks. This is likely to be true for most of the above countries as testing becomes more widely available and infection rates rocket.

Contact Information

For more information please contact:

Policy Unit

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor
1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: Policy_Unit@icmpd.org

ICMPD 2021. All rights reserved. Short sections, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted in the original language without explicit permission provided that the source is acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) alone.