

COVID-19 & the return of migrants

Briefing note – 12 June 2020

Crisis Impact Overview

- Many migrant workers, most of them from Nepal, lost their employment when the Indian government imposed a strict lockdown on 25 March to contain the spread of COVID-19 (Aljazeera, 10/06/2020) With the easing of the lockdown, 600,000 migrant workers are expected to return to Nepal in the coming weeks and may weaken the effectiveness of Nepal's COVID-19 mitigation measures. In March alone, around 500,000 people crossed the border from India without any screening or other measures applied. (Flood Resilience Alliance, 01/06/2020)
- Detailed information on the number of migrants passing through major Points of Entry to Nepal is not available, but as of 1 June more than 40,000 people have returned to the districts of Kanchanpur, Doti, Achham, Banke e Dailkeh. (DCA ACT alliance, 01/06/2020)
- Cases of COVID-19 are on the rise in Nepal. On June 9, Nepal recorded 3,762 confirmed cases and 14 deaths. More than 160,000 people are in quarantine, most are migrant returnees. If cases increase further, the national health system will likely be unable to handle the response, with only three beds per 1,000 inhabitants, lacking human resources and essential equipment. (Flood Resilience Alliance, 01/06/2020)
- Local authorities have established quarantine sites countrywide in order to prevent COVID-19 outbreak. All those returning to Nepal are accompanied to quarantine camps until the completion of their 14 days of quarantine. (Aljazeera, 10/06/2020) There are unconfirmed reports that quarantine camps lack basic facilities including water, hygiene facilities, food and bedding following the increasing number of returning Nepalese migrant workers.

Key figures



600,000
migrant workers predicted to return



High risk
of COVID-19 outbreak

Vulnerable groups

Elders, people with chronic diseases, pregnant women, children, persons with disabilities, those with compounded care burdens, people at risk of GBV

National response capacity

Government of Nepal (GoN) is leading the emergency response to COVID-19

International response capacity

UN Resident Coordinator's Office and WHO, the Humanitarian Country Team are leading the response

Anticipated scope and scale

- The healthcare system will likely be put under significant stress as a consequence of increased cases of COVID-19, and access to health services will become more limited. The return of Nepalese migrants will put additional pressure on an already overstretched healthcare system and will allow the virus to spread even faster. (Aljazeera, 10/06/2020)
- Monsoon season, which often leads to flooding, is approaching. Nepal faces the potential of multiple concurrent disasters. (UN Nepal, May 2020)



Humanitarian constraints

- Lockdown measures, restrictions on movement within the country, and flight access in and out are likely to prevent humanitarian workers from accessing populations in need of assistance. (UN Nepal, May 2020)
- Government of Nepal and the UN Relief Coordinator are working to enable the movement of those supporting the preparedness and response to COVID-19. Discussion is ongoing. (UN Nepal, May 2020)

Sectoral needs



Health

- People hosted in quarantine camps in different parts of the country report they do not have enough food, clean water, sanitation, and adequate health facilities. They fear the threat of multiple infections during their mandated stay. (Kathmandu Post, 18/05/2020)
- Shortages of medical equipment and supplies related to COVID-19 are already reported, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits at Points of Entry and in health facilities across the country. (Finnish Government, 04/05/2020)
- Insufficient means of transport to allow the transfer of people requiring urgent health services, including critical cases of COVID-19 and pregnant women, is a growing concern. The Logistic Cluster is currently working on the issue. (UN Nepal, May 2020)
- Laboratories are under-equipped. All medical facilities need to set up adequate management of medical waste to prevent patients from infecting others during their stay. (UN Nepal, May 2020)
- Awareness in the community about the importance of hygiene rules, physical distancing both at home and at work is still inadequate. The infection-prevention and control (IPC) system needs to be communicated to the population and it must include adequate individual protection devices (mask and gloves). (UN Nepal, May 2020)
- Medical logistics and supply chain need to be strengthened to enable an effective response. (UN Nepal, May 2020)



Protection

- Numerous school buildings are used as quarantine centres and do not offer spaces dedicated only to women. In view of the preponderance of men within the centres, women are given the opportunity to quarantine at home, which is not always possible. (UN Nepal, May 2020)
- There are reports that repatriated migrants are stigmatised and some have been denied service at restaurants and supermarkets. (Aljazeera, 10/06/2020)
- The most vulnerable groups in Nepal are exposed to social structures such as caste, social norms, discriminatory practices, and gender discrimination. (UN Nepal, May 2020) With the spread of the epidemic and the consequent risk of stigmatisation, this exposure is likely to increase.
- Officials record a rise in domestic violence. There is also a greater exposure to psychosocial and mental risks, as unintended consequences of border management procedures towards migrants. (UN Nepal, May 2020)



Food security

- The lockdown has contributed to job losses, especially for informal workers and returnee migrants. All economic activities have been suspended during the lockdown, reducing access to food. (UN Nepal, May 2020)
- The limited access to nutritional services caused by the restrictions of movement exposes to further risk pregnant women, infants and children under 5 of the poorest families. A support in this sense is necessary. (UN Nepal, May 2020)

Aggravating factors

Falling remittances

In 2019, remittances accounted for around 26% of the country's GDP, over USD 8 billion. More than half the households in Nepal depend on remittances from abroad. Families use remittances to finance their children's education, purchase basic necessities, and invest in small business activities. In India, the pandemic caused the recruitment of new workers to be suspended and has put three out of five jobs at risk. Remittances could drop by around 15% in 2020, a loss of more than USD 1 billion. (Relief web, 04/05/2020)

There are no good estimates of the number of Nepalese migrant workers abroad, but according to IOM, in India alone about 4 million Nepalese work in the formal and informal sectors. (UN Nepal, May 2020) Given thousands of Nepali migrant workers started to return to Nepal in late May, the continued drop in remittances threatens the stability of Nepal's fragile economy. (Aljazeera, 10/06/2020) Moreover, with the suspension of all economic activities and an estimated loss on revenues in the tourism sector of USD 400 million, the average monthly Nepalese revenue of micro, small and medium size enterprises is decreasing by 95%. (UNDP Nepal, May 2020)

Monsoon season

The monsoon season is approaching (June-September), and with expected increased risk of flooding and landslides This will complicate the fight against the spread of COVID-19 and exacerbate the situation for most vulnerable communities in the country. (Relief web, 05/06/2020) Disaster management capacities now employed countrywide to contain the spread of COVID-19 due to the international movement of Nepalese migrant workers, are generally at risk of being overwhelmed if they are put under additional stress. (Prevention web, 05/06/2020)

If evacuations will become necessary the Corona virus is likely to spread further and efforts to contain it will be hampered. An assessment of the flood evacuation sites in western Nepal shows that more than half have no facilities for hand washing and 80% have no quarantine facilities. Almost 60% of the communities interviewed have reported limited access to healthcare facilities, especially during floods and landslides in the monsoon season. More than 20% of the sites assessed are at risk of floods and landslides due to their location in flood-prone areas. (Flood Resilience Alliance, June 2020)

