

STAR FORUM

Migrant workers coming home: To what?

THE Covid-19 pandemic is pushing our migrant workers across the globe into unimaginable vulnerabilities. Without a regular income to sustain them in a foreign land, many have no savings to fall back on and are on the brink of starvation. Some have been arbitrarily detained and are languishing in jails in the Gulf countries in deplorable conditions. Tens of thousands of workers have already been sent back to Bangladesh—an overwhelming majority without their wages, termination benefits or other dues.

They have returned home to a depressed economy, with little prospects. Thousands more are expected to come back over the year, with oil prices plummeting and economies shrinking in the Gulf countries. What exactly is in store for these migrant workers who were our “golden boys and girls” when they sent remittances bolstering our GDP? What happens to their family members who depend on their earnings to survive? What opportunities can we create for them when millions in the formal and informal sector are struggling to find jobs?

In the first edition of *Star Forum*, a webinar series organised by *The Daily Star*, different stakeholders weighed in on the current challenges and suggested ways forward.

“Who can we turn to during our troubles, if not our own country?”



Emdadul Hoque
Returnee migrant
from Kuwait

After four months of lockdown, I reached Bangladesh on May 13. In our neighbourhood in Kuwait, we couldn't even get out of our rooms, let alone work. A lot of migrants struggled to get food as a result. During Ramadan, the only thing we had for Sehri was half a litre of water.

My employers or the government did nothing to help us when we were struggling with food shortages. My company owes me two months of salary, but because of the pandemic, they said it was not possible for them to pay me now. After that, they stopped contacting me and gave no support. In the meantime, my legal permission to stay in Kuwait expired on March 23, and I became an illegal migrant.

I had to pay Tk 900,000 to get this job, and with it comes a yearly payment of Tk 270,000 to stay in Kuwait. I had been saving money from November for this, and I lived on those savings during lockdown. Tk 220,000 gone—on just paying rent and eating. But I survived because of this. Most Bangladeshi workers, after deducting expenses, send their savings to Bangladesh. They are barely eating once a day. The government regulations of opening lockdown for only two hours a day made matters worse. There would be hundreds of us queuing to buy food from one shop, and those at the front would get the food. Those who didn't, just had to do without.

On May 1, the Kuwait government announced that illegal migrants had one month before they would be deported. I couldn't contact my company, so I contacted the relevant government department instead. Through them, I got in touch with the Bangladeshi embassy and came back home. But now that I am back, what will I do? We cannot find new employment during the pandemic, and our families depend on us. I appeal to the Bangladesh government to give us financial assistance and in the long run, help us to go back to work abroad or set something up here.

I only have one more appeal to our embassies—please do not ignore migrant workers; give them the treatment they deserve as citizens of Bangladesh. We are Bangladeshis in another country with no parents, no guardian—if we can't turn to our own embassies, where will we go?

“Documentation of wage theft and violations is the need of the hour”



Dr Tasneem Siddiqui
Professor of Political
Science and Chair of the
Refugee and Migrating
Movements Research Unit
(RMMRU) of the University
of Dhaka

We interviewed 50 male migrant workers (given the recent influx, we realise this is a mere number), but their stories are so heart wrenching that we've decided to document them. Some had been confined to their homes for three consecutive days without anything to eat. When they did finally step out, they were detained by the authorities. With no work or income, many decided to take up informal jobs, but were arrested soon after.

In Dubai, migrant workers were sent straight to detention centres; whatever they had on them (mobile phone, cash) were confiscated and they were not allowed to collect their personal belongings from home. Around 78 percent of the migrants we interviewed faced a similar fate. After forcing them into the detention centres, the authorities suggested the workers had to be repatriated because these centres were not safe—a meaningless claim. They were crammed into cells with 40 migrants in each, whereas the cells for locals held only three to four individuals. They were given barely edible food, and were forced to wear the same clothes for 28 days! Around



REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

84 percent of migrants said they are owed varying amounts in unpaid wages, benefits and other dues.

Female migrant workers are facing different kinds of problems. We learnt from various international organisations that a majority of them are victims of xenophobia and abuse. In Lebanon, many employers left the capital for their hometowns, leaving behind their female house-help without arranging even basic necessities. We are yet to find out about the women in detention centres.

What we need most is a comprehensive documentation of migrant workers' grievances. Organisations under the banner Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration are collecting information on the returnees and all stakeholders can coordinate to ensure proper documentation.

Regarding the “wage theft” amounting to billions of dollars, our embassies can play a significant role to ensure that dues are cleared before workers are sent home. There is now a global demand for an international justice system where we can make our workers' cases. But if we don't have the necessary information, what will we submit?

Five hundred crore is not satisfactory—at least Tk 2,000 crore should be allocated for the welfare of migrant workers. The loans alone will not do much good, the returnees need many more services to utilise the cash properly. The expatriate bank cannot handle this alone either. If other banks are involved in distributing the money alongside providing training and other facilities, only then we can expect progress.

“It is time for a proactive approach, rather than a reactive one”



CR Abrar
Professor of International
Relations at the University
of Dhaka

Migrant workers in the Middle East often have to pay a hefty fee for the annual renewal of their contract, although this should have been done by their companies, in their own interest. Employers conveniently shift this burden onto workers. So what we're seeing now—workers summarily discharged or held in detention, and coming back home without their due wages and benefits—is nothing unexpected. These structural issues deepening the precarity of our workers have long been in place. Even appeals by the UN and other international organisations to stop deportation and illegal detention of workers are falling on deaf ears. The world of labour cannot “build back better” without addressing these challenges.

One major issue that needs immediate attention is wage theft. According to the ILO, losses incurred by migrant workers in terms of lost wages and non-payment of gratuity and other benefits during Covid-19 will be to the tune of billions of dollars. We cannot fight this alone. It requires a multilateral intervention involving labour-sending countries, host countries, international partners and other stakeholders. Central to addressing wage theft is dismantling the deeply exploitative *kafala* or “sponsorship” system. In this regard, Migrant Forum in Asia, along with four other international

networks, have called upon countries of origin and destination to urgently create a transitional justice mechanism to address grievances, claims and labour disputes of repatriated workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. This gives us an idea of where to begin our work.

For Bangladesh, given how the problems have persisted for years, it is time we adopt a proactive approach rather a reactive one. We have to mobilise other countries to work against forced repatriation of workers. We need to ensure employers do not get away with non-payment of due wages and benefits. For that, proper documentation at every stage of their movement is vital—both in destination countries and when they come back home. It should include all employment records of individual workers as well as records of the payments due. This database will be particularly useful in any drive for compensations for exploited workers.

We need to explore new market opportunities as we go along, and once the oil price picks up, hopefully there will demand for labour again. Eventually, however, we have to accept that the ultimate solution to our overseas labour crisis lies in creating employment at home. This should be factored into our policy for workers coming back home.

“We are continuously following up on the crisis facing our migrant workers”



Nasreen Jahan
Joint Secretary, Ministry
of Expatriates' Welfare and
Overseas Employment

When our workers started to return in March, we formed a working committee with representatives of all the ministries concerned. We are continuously following up on the measures that have been taken by these ministries and working to help our returnee migrant workers, as well as those who are stuck in foreign countries and/or languishing in deportation centres and jails.

We have given Tk 200 crore cash incentives to our migrant workers through 32 foreign missions so that our workers do not go hungry. We gave Tk 5,000 to each worker who returned between March and May 31 as their conveyance allowance. The government has also created a fund worth Tk 200 crore from the Wage Earners Welfare Board and deposited it to the Probashi Kalyan Bank. Our returnee migrant workers can take loans worth Taka one to five lakh at only four percent interest rate from the bank without any mortgage and start small businesses. In the proposed budget, another 500 crore was allocated for strengthening and extending the loan facilities.

The government has other plans, such as providing skill training through our missions so workers do not have to return. We have been working with our development partners and donor organisations—ADB, World bank, Swiss Development Agency, IOM, ILO, UN Women, etc.—in this regard.

When a worker lands at the airport, they have to go to three points for documentation—the immigration desk, the health ministry's data entry point and the expatriate welfare ministry's data entry

point. Since this process takes a long time, we are trying to create a unified format of documentation. I too believe that our missions in foreign countries should have a database of our workers: about their employment status, the amount of unpaid salary, etc.

We have created a strong platform like Srom Obhibashon Forum where we tried to include all concerned ministries, NGOs and members of the civil society. We hope all of you will actively participate in that forum. We should also raise our voices on international platforms to ensure that our workers get their salary, gratuity and other benefits before their return.

“We need a returning centre to coordinate migrants' needs and opportunities”



Syed Saiful Haque
Founder Chairperson,
WARBE Development
Foundation

The government does not want to take responsibility for “irregular” workers, but most of the workers who become undocumented in the Gulf countries or Malaysia, didn't actually go there illegally. Are our officials following due process and monitoring what employment opportunities are available, and whether the employers who are issuing the demand letters actually have enough jobs to provide?

In Saudi Arabia, because of the *kafala* system, employers keep the workers' papers, including passports, and so if a worker tries to escape an exploitative situation, s/he becomes “irregular”. Despite paying huge sums of money and going there legally, people like Emdadul must pay the renewal fee every year, which is supposed to be borne by the recruitment company—without this, they become “irregular”. These are systemic problems which have become all the more evident during the pandemic. All of the international agreements, such as the Compact for Migration, are non-binding, so nothing is being implemented despite promises that the *kafala* system will be dismantled.

Why are we failing to demand that destination countries treat our workers with dignity and provide them with basic necessities? Our embassies need to reach out in this hour of need. The government says it is allocating Taka 12 crore to provide food, but this is insufficient, especially when they bring in USD 18 billion in remittances. In fact, all the money allocated for migrants, including the amount for loans, are actually from the Migrant Welfare Fund, which is basically the migrants' own money. We need the government to allocate funds from its own coffers.

The Foreign Minister made a proposal, which we have been making as well, that there should be a global fund under the United Nations to compensate workers robbed off their wages, but so far, there has been no mobilisation.

It is high time we set up a returnee centre dedicated for migrants, which will verify the dues, document violations of workers' rights, build their skills and act as a resource to connect migrants to employment opportunities, associations and networks.

Under the welfare board, a taskforce should be created with relevant stakeholders, including employers' federations. Our recruiting agencies have also failed to find new markets for our migrants. We need to do more to find emerging markets and train our people adequately.

“Our job is not to issue a compliance of any agreement but to assist the government in its demand to do so”



George Gigauri
Chief of Mission of the
International Organization
for Migration, the UN
Migration Agency

Most experts are clear that the socioeconomic consequences of the crisis are already outstripping the public health consequences. IOM, along with other agencies in the UN Migration Network, are working closely with the government to respond. We all agree that there are three main elements here—the pre-departure phase, the actual return and reception process, and the longer reintegration or possible remigration process.

In the first phase, we have to remember that not everyone has lost their jobs. Those that have, depending on which country they have returned from, have received some assistance from destination countries. In countries like Lebanon, they are in a terrible situation and need urgent humanitarian assistance while they wait for return. The government, NGOs and UN organisations are already working on this, but much more needs to be done.

Then there's the return and reception process, which has a public health dimension to it. We are bringing back thousands of migrants, not just workers—such as students, stranded migrants, failed asylum seekers. How do we make sure we don't bring back infected agents who act as super spreaders once they are reinstated in their communities? Do we have the facilities to quarantine the huge numbers of returnees? Ideally, tests should be done prior to return.

Lastly, for the re-integration phase, the UN General Secretary has issued a global directive to work on socioeconomic recovery, and so the whole UN country team is reprogramming what can be done in terms of humanitarian assistance and socioeconomic reintegration to this particular group, and hopefully, an emergency job package once the economy is open.

It is important to remember that this is a government-led process. The role of IOM and UN agencies in general is not to issue a compliance of any agreement but to assist the government in its demand to do so. Having said that, our main focus is to leave no one behind, and focus on those most vulnerable.

Access to justice is an important part of this process, but we are prioritising the humanitarian aspects. While wage theft is certainly an important issue, unfortunately, I don't see it being addressed right away. The humanitarian crisis of the returnees, most of whom are coming back to debt, is not a thing of the future—it's unfolding right now.